

Who are we really?

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Preacher: Brian King

[0 : 00] On your order of service as well, there's a sermon outline and that will help you to follow along. But of course, most importantly, we need God's help. So let's pray again and let's ask God for his help.

Father, as I get ready now to proclaim the testimony about you, Father, I confess that often like Paul, I feel that I do not come with eloquence or human wisdom. But Father, I thank you, Lord, that you do not use the strong, but you use the weak. And so, Father, please, Lord, I pray now that as your word goes forth, it will go forth in the power of your Holy Spirit. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Now, what do you see when you see church? Do you see a place with many problems? Perhaps church for you has been a place lacking in community.

You come, hoping to connect with like-minded people, longing to have rich and meaningful conversations, looking for companions to journey on this adventure called life together.

[1 : 07] But what you find instead is a club dominated by cliques, where you feel all alone because you don't belong to the right circles, and certainly not a place where you will find partners interested in helping you grow spiritually.

Or perhaps church for you has been a place lacking in humility. You love that verse in Galatians 3 where it says, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, because you are all one in Christ Jesus.

But your experience of church has been one where not knowing the right people, or not having the right talent, or simply not displaying the right piety results in being looked down upon.

You are inferior seems to be the implied message. Or perhaps church for you has been a place lacking in maturity. You want to know Jesus more and more, and you want to grow to be like him more and more.

But all around you, it seems as if people are not taking following Jesus seriously. They seem more interested in style than substance, more interested to sit back and do nothing.

[2 : 23] Corinth had a church with many problems. Paul had visited the city around AD 50 or so, where he preached to Jews and Gentiles alike. And Acts 18 verse 8 tells us that many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptised.

But after Paul left for Ephesus, problems began to crop up. For one thing, there was a clear lack of community. 1 Corinthians 1 verse 11 tells us that some people from Chloe's household had reported to Paul that quarrelling was commonplace in the church.

There appeared to be all sorts of rivalries and different factions popping up. The fact that there was social and economic diversity in the church didn't help matters.

Some were rich, some were poor, some were Jews, some were Gentiles. And all that made for a combustible mix. There was also a clear lack of humility.

As you read through 1 Corinthians 1 to 4 in particular, one of the buzzwords that will come up again and again is wisdom and power.

[3 : 37] Now those buzzwords are common in a place like Corinth. After all, it's where you go to climb up the ladder. It's an international centre of trade and industry.

It hosted the Isthmian Games. Think of that like the Olympics. And it's a hub of opportunity. A place where you go to try out your latest business ideas, or set up your dream NGO, or dabble in art and culture.

It's a city that promotes competition, that rewards achievement, that encourages self-glorification. And many of the Corinthian converts carried over the same mindset into the church.

They wanted to be spiritual. In other words, you will find often in 1 Corinthians. But it was a spirituality generated by acts of power and pride.

They were concerned only to show off their gifts, with no concern for their weaker brothers and sisters. And finally, there was a clear lack of maturity.

[4 : 49] In 1 Corinthians 5 verse 9, we discover that Paul has already written to them once, giving them advice about sexual immorality within the fellowship.

But things only got worse, perhaps due to misunderstandings. And if we keep reading on in 1 Corinthians, we discover too that many of them were still involved in visiting pagan temples, their meetings were characterized by disorder, and that truly mature Christians, like a man called Stephanus, was not being listened to.

I think Paul sums up the whole situation well in 1 Corinthians 3 verse 3. There, he says to them, you are still worldly.

You are Christians, but you're still being shaped by the values of the world, not the values of the cross. That's the underlying problem.

Now, let me ask you, how would you fix such a church? I think I probably wouldn't even try.

[6 : 04] I'll probably just complain. I'll grumble about how the church is shallow and hypocritical, and how terrible it is that I can't seem to find any good people. Or perhaps I'll criticize.

Maybe I'll criticize the church for being so superficial, for being so ignorant, so as to be unbidical. I'll be like, come on lah, you guys, you know Galatians 3, why don't you live it out?

But look at what Paul does first. He knows this is a church with many problems. He's received the reports. He's received the letters. And so you would think, he's ready to come at them, all guns blazing.

But instead, what we get is verse 4. I always thank my God for you. Now that's absolutely breathtaking, isn't it?

Paul knows what they are really like. But he begins with thanksgiving. It's hidden in our English translations, but verses 4 to 8 is actually one long sentence, where Paul pulls out his gratitude for the past, present, and future of the Corinthian church.

[7 : 25] Already he differentiates himself from me. I would complain. I would criticize. And in that sense, I'm already more like a Corinthian than I realize.

But Paul begins by taking the time to intentionally give thanks. And as he does so, he's not sweeping all the issues under the carpet.

He's not pretending that they don't exist or hoping that they will all go away on its own. On the contrary, he's actually engaging with them straight away.

It's striking that the things he thanks God for are precisely the things that are raising problems for the church. For instance, 1 Corinthians 12 to 14 later on will tell us that spiritual gifts are a point of contention.

And yet, we see this is exactly what Paul gives thanks for. You see, Paul isn't just showing mere courtesy. He's worked out already why they are having so many difficulties.

[8 : 37] And it all stems from a failure to grasp their identity. Who are we, really? That's what he wants the Corinthian church to think about.

And so with his opening words, he begins pastoring them with rich theology. As he gives thanks for them, he's also seeking to correct their perspective and get them back on track.

Now, I'll explain how that is so in a moment. But what I want us to know is that this is what God wants to do for us as well. We might not have the exact same problems as the Corinthians, although as we go along, some of their struggles are going to sound pretty contemporary.

But every church faces an ongoing battle not to take on the character of this world.

And so to keep us on track, we need to regularly ask, who are we, really? What is our God-given identity?

[9 : 47] It's a great question to ask, especially at the beginning of a new year. And so today, Paul will show us who we really are from 1 Corinthians 1, verse 1 to 9 as a way to keep us on track.

And the first thing he shows us is that we are called by God to be holy. We are called by God to be holy. Now, I wonder, how do we normally identify churches?

Perhaps we do so by its denominational affiliation. And so we might say, oh, KEC is a BEM or SIB church. That's why I go here because my family has always been SIB.

Or we might say, oh, St. Faith, that's an Anglican church. And so on. Or sometimes, we might do so by who pastors or attends it. And so we might say, oh, I go to Pastor Lim Gityong's church or the church where Dato'r Janong Bung Su attends and so on.

But how does Paul identify the church in Corinth? He doesn't do so on the basis of which denomination it belongs to or who its leaders are.

[11:05] Instead, he writes, verse 2, to the church of God in Corinth. Now, that's certainly unique.

He doesn't write like this in any of his other letters. Paul identifies the church as ultimately belonging to God. And that means it doesn't belong to anyone else.

B-E-M-K-E-C certainly doesn't belong to me. Blessed Church doesn't belong to Pastor Gityong. It doesn't even belong to its membership.

That makes it different from a golf club or Toastmasters. It belongs to God alone. Or to put it another way, we belong to God alone.

We are his church and therefore we are his possession. We are summoned to do his bidding. When we say we belong to K-E-C or any other church, we are saying that's who we are.

[12:17] We don't just belong to a religious group, one that, you know, we just take off on the form. We belong to God. Why?

Because as a church, we have been called by God. That's what it means to be sanctified. Did you notice that's how the church is described in verse 2?

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus. Now, normally, if you consult a theology textbook, you would learn that to be sanctified is to have ongoing growth in holiness.

And that is certainly one meaning of the word. But in this case, as it often is in the New Testament, that's not what sanctified means. Rather, it's used in the sense of its other meaning, which is to be withdrawn from ordinary use for special purposes.

In the Old Testament, the utensils, certain utensils were sanctified. That is, they were set apart for special use in particular rituals.

[13:34] And now, Paul is saying that the church is set apart for the purposes of God. And that's what makes KEC different to a political party, a charitable organization, or a neighborhood association.

It's not like any entity in this world because it's summoned, as we'll see in two weeks' time, to bear the wisdom of God.

But here's what's amazing. If Paul was describing the church in, say, Philippi, we would all nod along. You see, that's a model church, you know, one that stands firm in the gospel, cares for people, supports Paul in his ministry.

But the church in Corinth, this church that is full of quarrels, that tolerates sexual immorality, and can't even do worship properly, this church is sanctified, this church with problems problems, is the church God has called to do his work.

Well, yes, that's how Paul sees it. It's not that Paul has completely lost sight of their sin. I keep reading 1 Corinthians, and it's clear he hasn't.

[15:04] But he has not lost sight of something more significant. He has not lost sight of their saviour. These people he's writing to may be in Corinth, and right now, influenced by Corinthian values, but more significantly, they are still in Christ Jesus.

And when you are in Christ, that means you are united to Christ. Every part of your life is joined to Christ so thoroughly that it can be said that every part of Christ represents every part of you.

You share in his life. You share in his death. You share in his resurrection. You even share in his ascension. If Christ is seated in the heavenlies, so are you.

And as you share in Christ, Christ covers you. his sacrifice covers your sin. His integrity covers your shame.

His strength covers your shortcomings. That's true of even the church with problems. For God never caught us due to our worthiness or merit.

[16:31] There was nothing in us that made God think, oh, wow, I want them on my team. Instead, God caught us while we were still unclean and unfit.

And it's only by his grace and peace in Christ that we are set apart at all. We're sanctified only because we are caught into fellowship with Christ, verse 9, and we in turn call on his name, verse 3. And so that immediately poses a challenge for us. How do you see your fellow Christians?

Do you see them only as troublemakers or disruptors or slackers? Or do you see them as being in Christ?

You see, when someone is truly trusting in Christ, yes, they are probably along way from what they should be. God's not finished with them yet.

[17 : 39] But this is just as key. They are not what they once were. If someone is truly in Christ, something remarkable has happened to them.

The Bible says they are forgiven. They are loved. They are a new creation. Because they are no longer their own.

They belong to God. They belong to Christ. Is that what you see when you look at your fellow Christian? Do you see a problem to be dealt with?

Or do you see a person to love as God loves? That's how Paul sees these Corinthians. are full of problems.

And yet they belong to God. They are sanctified in Christ Jesus. And that's how we are to see our brothers and sisters.

[18 : 44] But if that is true, that also means the following is true too. Sanctified people, Paul says, are called to be his holy people.

In other words, what you are impacts what you would be like. The idea is this. If you know your humble bathroom for whatever reason has been set apart to be used by a distinguished visitor, you would definitely begin giving it a good scrub, wouldn't you?

And making sure that the water heater works. Maybe you might even buy a new water heater. If something is set apart for someone show, you would ensure that it is fit for purpose.

Well, how much more if it is we ourselves who have been set apart for God? If you have been called out of this world to be set apart for the purposes of representing God to this world, then it only follows that you stop acting like the world.

Otherwise, you wouldn't be fit for purpose. That's what Paul is calling us to. Verse 2 makes clear that this calling is for every church, not just the Corinthian church.

[20 : 12] To be holy is simply to be fit for God's purposes. It's to be in Corinth, but not off Corinth.

to be in guching, but not off guching, in the sense that we don't take on any guching values that prove ungodly.

And that will have implications for how our church acts in this world. It will have implications for how we deal with divisions, how we relate to pagan religions, even how we should think of sexual relations, as will be evident from the remainder of this letter.

Now, what does that mean for us as a church today? We'll touch on this more as we journey through 1 Corinthians, but here are some initial possibilities. To be fit for purpose is to make sure that pride and envy has no place amongst us.

To be fit for purpose is to pursue peace and man broken relationships. To be fit for purpose is to care about the impact of our behaviour on others.

[21 : 28] Indeed, to be fit for purpose is to hold each other accountable. And to be fit for purpose ultimately is to keep remembering what our purpose is in the first place.

We are called to be holy because we belong to a God who is holy. Because this is who we are, it follows.

This is how we should live. Secondly, we are gifted by God with generosity.

We are gifted by God with generosity. In verse 4, Paul speaks of the grace God has given them.

Now, grace, of course, speaks of the undeserved kindness of God towards the Corinthians, especially in saving them.

But in this case, Paul is speaking a little more specifically. For this grace that has been given them is no mere invisible thing.

[22 : 35] Rather, it has been made evident in the life of the congregation. Look at verse 5. Now, that's probably a reference to spiritual gifts.

Paul is affirming the fact that the Corinthian church has been given the gifts of tongues and prophecy amongst other things. In fact, in verse 7, we're told that they lack no spiritual gift.

He doesn't mean that individually, as if every individual had all the spiritual gifts, but that as a church, they lacked nothing.

They had all they needed to thrive. They were enriched in every way. But it's interesting that in verse 5, he singles out these gifts of speech and knowledge of tongues and prophecy.

Why is that? For these were the gifts that the Corinthians most valued. After all, in their minds, they are probably more spectacular.

[23 : 49] And interestingly, as we read on in 1 Corinthians, these were the gifts that had caused much division. These were the gifts that puffed up the Corinthian Christians who had them. And these were the gifts they were misusing because they were lacking in love.

And so Paul purposely calls attention to them so that he can help them gain the right perspective on them. The gifts themselves, he says, are not the problem.

These are authentic gifts to be celebrated with thanksgiving. And Paul doesn't hesitate to do so. It's a good thing the church has them, he says. But he doesn't celebrate by thanking God for how spiritually brilliant the Corinthians are, or how vibrant their faith is for them to possess these gifts. Rather, he celebrates these gifts simply by pointing back to the giver. We have all these gifts, he says, because they are God's expression of grace given to us.

We are gifted by God with generosity, not rewarded by God because we're so great. That's who we are, that's who we always will be.

[25 : 18] We are people who gratefully receive God's gifts and say, thank you, knowing that we can never claim credit for them. We are gifted simply as a way of confirming we have accepted the gospel, as verse 6 puts it.

And I think that's how Paul can remain thankful even for this church with many problems. Because he constantly remembers that's who he is.

He may be an apostle, but he was caught by the will of God, not because he's proven himself to be anything special. remember, this guy was persecuting Christians.

The very existence of his own faith and his own vocation is a miracle in itself. And he knows that. And so that's who we are.

The fact that we even trust in Christ is a miracle in itself. We are not naturally gifted people, but people gifted by God with generosity.

[26 : 29] And when we have this perspective, when we are in awe that God will show such grace to us, we will find it easier to delight in the way God works in others.

It will be easier to say of my brothers and sisters, I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.

we will be able to celebrate how God is using someone else in the kingdom in big or small ways, rather than agitate over who is doing what.

Now, earlier on, I asked, how do you see your fellow Christian? Well, here's a slightly different question. When was the last time you gave thanks for a fellow Christian?

when was the last time you said to God, I thank you that he or she is here with us? Yes, even that person who has let you down in the past. And when was the last time you actually told another Christian, not just God, but another believer, that you were thankful for how they are exercising their gifts?

[27 : 48] How thankful you are that they are not only encouraging you, but they are also correcting you. If we did that a little more regularly, it would have a profound impact on the whole community, that's for sure.

It would clearly set us apart from the world. Now, at this point, I think I know what some of you are asking. You're thinking, okay, that's pretty easy to do with a Christian that I get along with, but how can we nurture such gratitude for a fellow Christian that we might find difficult?

One possible way is to resolve to pray for them. Now, I've mentioned this book before, Life Together, by Dietrich Bonheifer.

It really is one of the most profound Christian books that I've ever read, and it's one that I find that I must reread every few years. And this is what Bonheifer says. It's on the screen. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me.

His face, that hither though may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner.

[29 : 14] This is a happy discovery for the Christian who begins to pray, for others. Now that's profound, isn't it? That's wise counsel.

And so let's understand that we have been gifted generously by God. Let's thank God for all the gifts that our brothers and sisters have. And more than that, let's use whatever we've been given to help each other grow in Christ.

That's something Paul will unpack more in 1 Corinthians 12-14. When we've been disappointed by people in the church in the past, I know that it's possible for us to withhold our gifts to serve the church.

We think to ourselves, why bother? But even messy churches are still God's church, and we serve him.

And we do that also because we are waiting for the day, verse 8, when our Lord Jesus Christ is to be revealed.

[30 : 23] Victory has been won, but the war is not yet over, and the devil still wants to inflict as many casualties as he can. And so we need to help each other persevere by serving each other with the gifts God has given us.

But as we do that, we can have hope. Why? Because let me tell you who else we are. Thirdly, we are sustained by God for our destiny.

We are sustained by God for our destiny. In verse 9, we're reminded who God is. God is faithful. But what is he faithful to?

In some circles, it's taught that God is faithful to fulfill our deepest aspirations, that is, to bring about our dream career, or to bring about our dream lifestyle.

That's our destiny, it said. But according to 1 Corinthians, what is our destiny? Well, the answer lies at the end of verse 8.

[31 : 37] It is so that we may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's a bit different, isn't it? But that is the aspiration of every true Christian.

And the good news is God says that it's also our destiny. Now, those words might be familiar, which means that at first glance, we might miss out just how remarkable that statement is.

But remember again who Paul is writing to. He's writing to the church with many problems. He's writing to a church that is anything but blameless in their behaviour.

And yet, Paul is confident that although the church looks like a total mess right now, one day, it will not be so. I don't know if you think of KEC as a church with many problems.

I hope not, but you could be right. But if so, God is telling us now, it won't always be so. And what is the reason for such confidence?

[32 : 49] Well, we come back to verse 9 because God is faithful. More specifically, he's faithful to ensure you stay faithful. Verse 8 flashes it out.

He will also keep you firm to the end. That's who we are if we are those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to fellowship with him.

Maybe you look around today and you worry about what lies ahead. I certainly do worry about what challenges 2021 might pose for KEC. And in many ways, I don't feel ready.

And so I need to keep remembering verses 8 and 9. God is faithful. He will keep us to the end. That's who we are.

But I think Paul is also doing something else by getting us to focus on the future. You see, one of the things that becomes clear as you read through 1 Corinthians is that the church had become too easily satisfied.

[33 : 56] They thought they had already arrived. They have all the gifts. They have all the knowledge. What else do they need? They were impressed with themselves. They believed they were essentially blameless.

And that will become especially clear in chapter 4. It's why Paul would sarcastically say to them in 4 verse 8, already you have all that you want. Already you have become rich.

You think that you're so mature that you don't even need to wait for Jesus to come back. You have it all. But Paul says that's a huge mistake.

But when you think like that you become complacent. You become too comfortable. When you're convinced that you've got nothing more to learn you stop depending on Jesus and you slowly default back to the values of this world.

When Jesus is no longer the anchor the church begins to drift. But Paul says look verse 7 even people who don't lack any gifts are still people who eagerly await.

[35 : 11] Even people generously gifted by God still have plenty of growing left to do. They don't think they have everything. For in this life, to use an illustration, we are not yet on our island paradise, but we are still on the ship, sailing through storms, waiting to land on the shore.

And that's why we still suffer. That's why we still sin. That's why we still struggle. This is who we are. Sailors navigating storms on a ship.

But we are sustained. We are sustained by God. And that's also who we are.

And so here's one final question for today. Do we see ourselves eagerly awaiting the Lord? Are we longing to get to shore and doing all we can to steer the ship in that direction?

Or are we more like a cruise ship where everything is comfortable but it's got no anchor and no direction and so we're steadily drifting further and further away from our intended destination?

[36 : 32] If we are the former, now here's the good news, God will be the win in our sails. Let's just make sure that's who we are. So church, who are we really?

Well this is what God tells us today. We're called by God to be holy, gifted by God with generosity and sustained by God for our destiny.

But let me just add one more thing. We are above all to be centred on Christ alone. It's easy to miss it but did you notice how Jesus is the focus of this opening section?

He is present in every single verse. Count for yourselves. You see, if you ever see a church with an ever-growing list of problems, you can be sure of one thing.

They've lost their focus on Christ. On paper, their core convictions might say, we are a Bible-based, Christ-centered church, but in practice, Jesus has been sidelined.

[37 : 46] And so in 2021, let's not become that church. And it all begins by letting Christ define who we are, not by insisting we know it all.

Let's be who God caused us to be. Let's pray. Father, as we gather again, we recognize, Lord, that you are speaking to us.

And Father, we just want to say, and I just want to say, thank you first of all for all my brothers and sisters here, because they have called on your name, and therefore they are sanctified in Christ Jesus.

They enjoy your grace and your peace. And thank you for the many gifts that are present in this very fellowship. And thank you for all the people who exercise them to build each other up.

But Father, we pray that we will continue to heed your call, that we would be your holy people, we would be people who call on your name amongst ourselves, and amongst the world, and that in this way, we would call attention to who you are and what you are doing.

[39 : 16] Thank you that you promise to keep all those who trust in you truly to the end, and we look forward to that day where we will ultimately be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So we thank you again for all the grace that you have showered on us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.