

(( ( PREACHING *the* WORD )) )

# 1 CORINTHIANS

*The* **WORD** *of the* **CROSS**



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R. Kent Hughes

*Series Editor*

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## **PREACHING THE WORD**

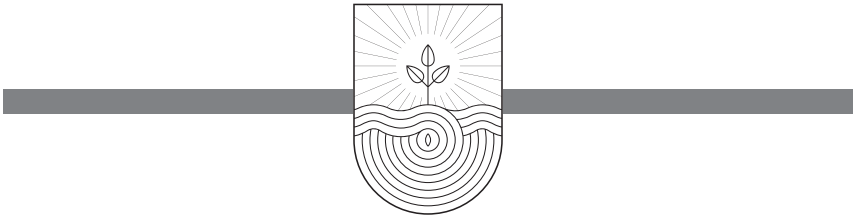
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STEPHEN T. UM

R. Kent Hughes

*Series Editor*

■ ■ CROSSWAY

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*1 Corinthians*

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To my beautiful wife Kathleen,  
who has shaped my preaching more than anyone





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# A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases, and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never perfectly embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes

out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but he does.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you preach the Word may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

*R. Kent Hughes*  
*Wheaton, Illinois*

# Preface

Having been involved in full-time pastoral ministry for over twenty-five years, I've had the opportunity to preach the Word of God in many contexts. I've preached numerous sermons, but have heard my fair share of sermons as well. When it comes to delivering God's Word, every preacher wants to preach a good sermon for the glory of God and the benefit of his listeners. However, preachers are merely called to present good sermons through careful exegetical study. In terms of crafting a good sermon to potentially become a great one—that is the work of the Holy Spirit. Just as priests were called to set up the altar to make sacrifices to honor God, and only God could provide the fire; so it is with preaching. It is the preacher's responsibility to do all the preparatory work necessary to deliver a good sermon, but it will be the work of the Holy Spirit to take a hold of it and change the hearts of its listeners.

I believe a sermon needs to do three things to the glory of God: (1) contain a careful exposition; (2) create sensation for the listener; and (3) provide contextual application. In this sense, the sermon has to be tri-perspectival. It first needs to explain the text. Then it needs to understand the people's existential needs to help them gain a sense for what the Word of God is saying. And finally, it should apply gospel truths into every dimension of life and ministry.

Another tri-perspectival way of looking at a sermon is to understand it within the context of the three offices of the Messiah: prophet, priest, and king. The sermon has to be prophetic, in that it needs to explain the normative truth of God's Word. It has to be priestly by recognizing human need and addressing the hearts of its hearers. And lastly, it needs to be situational, recognizing the immediate context for which these truths will be applied and implemented in the life of the Christian.

When developing the material for this commentary, many of the thoughts and reflections were directly created from my weekly sermon preparation. In all, I preached nearly thirty sermons through the entire book of 1 Corinthians to my urban congregation in Boston. This particular setting often reminds me that there are always mildly curious skeptics who are present in the audience while I am preaching. With that in mind, I cannot assume that people have basic biblical categories for what the gospel is. I believe that the gospel is the power onto salvation; it is the power that not only gets people into the kingdom of God, but also the power that sustains them in the kingdom. And

so, in the context of the city, I am always aware of the apologetic sidebars; or the so-called “Christian defeaters.” Countless times throughout my preaching through 1 Corinthians, questions, doubts, and rebuttals are going through the mind of many of the listeners.

In addition, I was forced to be aware of the cultural and corporate idols that exist within my current setting and city (Boston, MA). In order to address them, the bulk of my preaching effort was directed to present the person of Jesus, who is the only satisfying answer to the longings of our culture. When I was expositing a given text, my approach was not only to merely explain the main idea of a given text—which is the authorial intent—but also to situate that idea within the context of the big idea. Therefore, these sermons understood Paul’s immediate context in light of the one-story plotline of Scripture which finds its fulfillment in Jesus.

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to Kent Hughes for inviting me to participate in this series. I’ve thoroughly enjoyed our friendship and partnership in the gospel these past few years, and praise God for the work he is doing in putting together such great pastoral resources. I want to express a deep sense of gratitude for Ted Griffin at Crossway for spending meticulous hours in editing this volume. For all their support and encouragement, I am indebted to my pastoral staff (Nameun, Ben, Andrew, Daniel, Tim) at Citylife Presbyterian Church for assisting me with their amazing editorial work. I would like to especially thank Justin Ruddy and David Cho for helping me to preach through this series. They are two young preachers whose preaching I greatly admire. Lastly, I would express my deep appreciation, love, and acknowledgement to my family for their constant grace and perseverance, particularly my wife, Kathleen, and my daughters, Noël, Adeline, and Charlotte. I am forever grateful to God for calling and equipping me to be a preacher of his.

# 1

## Surprised by Encouragement

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1–9



WHEN APPROACHING A BOOK OF THE BIBLE it is not uncommon to sense a tangible difference between the ancient setting and our own context. While all of Scripture is clear and understandable, there are admittedly some portions that demand more of the reader than others. Unlike some of the more thorny passages of Scripture, the book of 1 Corinthians is one that presents the modern reader with numerous touch points. Yes, there will be interpretive questions to ask and cultural differences to comprehend, but on the whole 1 Corinthians presents us with an original context that looks strikingly like our modern-day setting. Here we meet a church that faces issues much like the ones we face. How are we to handle disagreements among God’s people? What does a Christian sexual ethic look like when promiscuity is the cultural norm? In what ways does the gospel shape the institution of marriage? How should we relate to the cultural customs and practices of those with whom we disagree on matters of faith? How can the gospel tear down barriers that we have built between others and ourselves? We could go on.

The one who sets about answering these and other questions in the book of 1 Corinthians is the Apostle Paul (v. 1).<sup>1</sup>

He writes specifically “to the church of God that is in Corinth,” and generally to “all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 2). A little bit of digging reveals that the city of Corinth<sup>2</sup> shared much in common with the cities of our own time. So we’ll find that Paul’s explication and application of the gospel happens on the ground level. He’s



working out the implications of God's grace in the context of a pluralized, influential, cutting-edge city.

Corinth was an *aspirational* city.<sup>3</sup> Its citizens were looking to advance on the ladder of upward social mobility,<sup>4</sup> and they did this by aspiring to affluence<sup>5</sup> for the sake of establishing their own honor.<sup>6</sup> "The core community and core tradition of the city culture were those of trade, business, entrepreneurial pragmatism in the pursuit of success,"<sup>7</sup> and "perhaps no city in the Empire offered so congenial an atmosphere for individual and corporate advancement."<sup>8</sup> David Garland gives us a feel for the culture of the city and the way it overlaps with our own experience in the West:

To use terms from American culture: schmoozing, massaging a superior's ego, rubbing shoulders with the powerful, pulling strings, scratching each other's back, and dragging rivals' names through the mud—all describe what was required to attain success in this society.<sup>9</sup>

Alongside the clamoring for affluence and honor, Corinth was also an *explorational* city. It was characterized by a cosmopolitan spirit and religious diversity. Being a center for trade, Corinth was occupied (and regularly visited) by a diverse group of people from all walks of life. As a result, "Corinthians were rootless, cut off from their country background, drawn from races and districts all over the empire."<sup>10</sup> It was a city that contained a variety of religious faith communities so that the everyday Corinthian had any number of potential options when thinking about which religion or belief system might fit him best. Garland states that "as a cosmopolitan city, Corinth was a religious melting pot with older and newer religions flourishing side by side"; in other words, "they could choose from a great cafeteria line of religious practices."<sup>11</sup>

As an aspirational and explorational city, Corinth looked much like the individualistic cultures in which many of us find ourselves in the twenty-first century.

The ideal of the Corinthian was the reckless development of the individual. The merchant who made his gain by all and every means, the man of pleasure surrendering himself to every lust, the athlete steeled to every bodily exercise and proud in his physical strength, are the true Corinthian types: in a word, the man who recognized no superior and no law but his own desires.<sup>12</sup>

It is into this context that Paul has occasion to speak. And in doing so he will address Christians who were being forced to ask many of the questions that we now find ourselves asking. Though the letter will go on to reveal significant issues within the Corinthian community, Paul begins with a note

of profound, surprising encouragement. We'll consider this encouragement in three movements:

- The Truth of Encouragement
- The Tension of Encouragement
- The Basis of Encouragement

### The Truth of Encouragement

Encouragement is a basic human need. Few people flourish in the absence of affirmation, approval, or some external declaration of worth. We long to be inherently valued—to have someone say, “I approve of who you are.” We want to be respected for the contributions that we make (i.e., “I approve of what you do”). And we long deeply for assurance that the direction we are heading is one worthy of our investment and commitment (i.e., “I approve of where you are headed”). Paul will have to say some hard things to the Corinthians in the pages ahead; so he begins his letter with a surprising, well-rounded dose of encouragement.

#### *Identity Encouragement*

The apostle encourages the Corinthians in their identity in his opening salutation by addressing them as “those sanctified<sup>13</sup> in Christ Jesus, called to be saints<sup>14</sup> . . .” (v. 2). In this way he reminds them that they have been set apart by God—that they are important and unique because someone has declared them to be. In a city that measured one’s honor by the importance of the patron<sup>15</sup> and friends to which a person was attached, to be set apart by God would have been the ultimate reassurance of one’s identity. Though all the surrounding voices might tell them otherwise, to be sanctified in Christ—past tense—was to have already received the ultimate word of approval, acceptance, and identity encouragement. Similarly, the fact that they were “called to be saints” meant that their identity and purpose was externally bestowed upon them. Rather than working to build their identity or to self-manufacture a sense of purpose, they had received theirs by way of the gracious call of God.

#### *Aptitude Encouragement*

Along with being settled in their identity, Paul wants the Corinthians to know that they are well equipped to live into that identity. In our common experience, the thing that lies beyond the question of identity (i.e., “Who am I?”) is the question of aptitude (“What am I to do?”). Aptitude is typically made

up of the collection of gifts, skills, and abilities that you have been given,<sup>16</sup> combined with the steps you have taken to hone them. While still rooting their activity in the gracious activity of God, Paul speaks to the Corinthians as those who have been “enriched in . . . all speech and all knowledge”<sup>17</sup> (v. 5). They are able to speak clear, convincing words about the faith. They are also knowledgeable; they are not lacking in their grasp of the intellectual content of the Christian faith.

In a city and culture that placed an incredible amount of value on rhetoric<sup>18</sup> and logic, Paul’s compliment about their speech and knowledge is an affirmation that they are not lacking in their culture’s most marketable commodity. Furthermore, their speech and knowledge is not something they achieved by studying under the most prominent rhetoricians and philosophers, but they have been given them as gifts from God (v. 4). In this way both their identity and aptitude are secure because they have been externally bestowed.

### *Trajectory Encouragement*

When you combine an identity with aptitude, you get forward momentum. We are all heading somewhere, and the questions that hang over our heads are: Where? What does my future hold? How can I know that my trajectory is worthwhile? Is it reasonable for me to be hopeful about my destination? Paul answers these questions for the Corinthians when he claims that Jesus “will sustain<sup>19</sup> [them] to the end” (v. 8). In essence, he tells the Corinthians that they are on the right trajectory. Their lives are worthwhile, and the path that they are on is clearly leading to the beautiful end that God has in store for them. This sure trajectory is rooted in the faithfulness<sup>20</sup> of God (v. 9) who called them and crafted them for his purposes.

We can imagine the substantial encouragement this would have been to readers living in a city where one’s trajectory was perpetually insecure. In a meritocracy, one’s future is only as secure as one’s present success.<sup>21</sup> When your temporal future is only as certain as your ability to keep performing at a high level, the comfort of knowing that your eternal future has already been decided is the ultimate encouragement. In this way we can be encouraged that our futures are just as secure. We are not unfamiliar with the demand for high performance and the temptation of embarking on self-security projects, but the Scriptures assure us that no matter the uncertainty or precariousness of our present situation, our Lord Jesus Christ “will sustain [us] to the end” (v. 8), and we will enjoy life with him because we “were called into the fellowship<sup>22</sup> of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 9).

*Surprising Encouragement*

Can you imagine receiving a letter like this from a leader? Of course, when we read a letter from a superior or supervisor, we are hoping for encouragement, but we recognize that it is almost always attached to our level of performance. Paul avoids tying their identity, aptitude, and trajectory to their performance, opting instead to encourage them flat-out. He is essentially saying, “Regardless of what you bring to the table, God finds you incredibly valuable and worthy of investment. And on top of that, he is going to ensure that you are sustained and carried through to a joy-filled life with him in the future.” Perhaps we expect to receive praise for a job well done, but no one expects to receive this kind of unconditional encouragement, particularly not when they were conducting themselves the way the Corinthians were. It’s at this point that we are introduced to a significant tension in Paul’s letter.

*The Tension of Encouragement*

In order to sense the tension in this text, we need to look ahead into the rest of the letter. If you are a first-time reader of the epistle, you may think that the Corinthians are doing an outstanding job of living into their God-given identity in Christ. Perhaps Paul will simply go on praising them. Perhaps this is what the original Corinthian readers might have hoped for. But the reality was that the church was profoundly, tragically flawed. As soon as we leave this section (vv. 1–9), we find a letter written to a church that is riddled with problems. The next heading in your Bible likely says something like “Divisions in the Church.” The truth of the matter is that the Corinthians are the last people in the world who should be getting the kind of encouraging introduction that Paul has just given them. Let’s consider the reality of what was happening in the Corinthian church.

*Living Contrary to Their Identity*

Although their identity is objectively settled as “sanctified” (v. 2), the rest of Paul’s letter bears out that their subjective and experiential reality is far from saintly. Instead the idols of those within the church overlap with the idols of the city of Corinth. For example, the idolatrous aspirationalism of the culture dominates the church. While they ought to be defined by their primary identification with Christ, they are more concerned with aligning themselves to a particular Christian leader, and this has created stratification and factionalism (3:4–9). In their attempts to set themselves apart as honorable they have perverted the Lord’s Supper, turning it into an occasion to separate the

haves from the have-nots (11:17–22). The moral, ambiguous explorationalism of the city is also vividly present. The fifth chapter makes it plain that the unrestrained passion and unbridled lust that was characteristic of the city was alive and well in the church. To their shame, they were engaged in things “not even tolerated among the pagans” (5:1).

*Prideful about Their God-Given Aptitude*

God had gifted the Corinthians with an identity, and he continued to pour out his blessings by enriching them “in all speech and all knowledge” (v. 5). But rather than seeing these gifts for what they were, the Corinthians began to take pride in them, mistakenly assuming that their aptitude was the actual basis of their identity. We can see this by looking at the sources of the divisions that unfold throughout the book. For instance, they are more concerned with eloquent speech than with grasping the true wisdom of God (1:18–31). And rather than finding unity in the knowledge they have received they have divided minds (1:10–17). They are overly concerned with pedigree and position, and as a result they are choosing to lead with competence in place of character—gifts in place of grace.

This happens each time we unhinge our gifts from their God-given source and neglect to use them the way he intends us to use them in community. Take an exceptional violinist. She may be heads above the others in her section and able to pull off amazing technical feats. However, if she becomes preoccupied with her gift and ignores her responsibility to accept the authority of the conductor, as well as the community of the orchestra, she will end up playing something that draws attention to herself but is out of tune with the rest of the orchestra. She has a phenomenal gift in isolation, but her pride in her gift has hindered her from using it properly. The end result of leading with aptitude instead of identity is communal disharmony.

*On a Dysfunctional Trajectory*

Though Paul is convinced that Jesus will “sustain [the Corinthian church] to the end” (v. 8), the rest of the book tells us that the church is severely unhealthy. In one case it is so bad that the apostle instructs the church to remove one of their members due to his flagrant sin (5:4, 5). While even that instruction is given with the purpose of ultimate restoration (5:5), the many issues we confront in the book of 1 Corinthians make us rightly question how this is all going to turn out for good. It would seem that the objective reality by which Paul encourages and commends them is being called into

question by the subjective experience of the church. How is it possible that people who have received the grace of God and who will be preserved to the end could live this way?

If all of this is true, and if we see it reflected in our own lives and churches, how can we believe the content of Paul's encouragement? If our subjective experience is one of dissatisfaction and disharmony, then how is it possible to have confidence in believing that this encouragement is true of us? Is there a way to re-ground our identity, to rightly reevaluate our aptitude, and to live lives that are rightly aligned with the promised trajectory of perseverance?

### The Basis for Encouragement

In short, the basis for Paul's encouragement to the Corinthian church is that their past, present, and future have been confirmed, declared, secured, enriched, and sustained in Christ. Take a look at our text again and see just how Christ-saturated it is:

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of *Christ Jesus*, and our brother Sosthenes,

To the church of God that is in Corinth, 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*. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in *Christ Jesus*, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about *Christ* was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of *our Lord Jesus Christ*, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of *our Lord Jesus Christ*. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of *his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*. (1:1–9)

All of the realities of Paul's surprising encouragement are grounded in Christ. The Christian's identity is not self-made or self-maintained. It is the result of an outside action of God on our behalf. We are sanctified not in ourselves but "in Christ Jesus" (v. 2). We are "called to be saints" not because we are inherently saintly but simply because we "call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 2). The grace and peace we experience is delivered to us "from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 3). The grace we experience was not earned but was a gift given to us "in Christ Jesus" (v. 4). Our speech and knowledge are "enriched in him" (v. 5). We are confident in our faith because God confirmed the "testimony about Christ" among

us (v. 6). Our future hope is not in our manifold gifts or in the potential of our achievements but in “the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 7). In Christ, God sustains us to the end. He has promised to make us—the guilty—“guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 8). And we are absolutely certain of this because “God is faithful,” and he has called us into “the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 9).

It may seem redundant, but Paul’s laser focus on the work of God in Christ is meant to frame the entirety of his reflections throughout the book of 1 Corinthians. He wants the troubled church that he is addressing to know this: God’s objective reality overrides their subjective experience. Christ’s work on their behalf is more foundational to their identity than their ability to sully it with their failings. He is essentially saying, “Look, Corinthian church, you may be falling apart at the seams, but the God who called you has secured your past, present, and future. He is holding you together.”

What does this mean for us? It means that our status as “sanctified” and “saints” is not based upon our work but upon the work of another. Our identity is sure because it was given to us by someone else. Our gifts are sure and sufficient because they were given to us by the gift-maker. And our future is secure because it has been prepared for us by the one who holds the future in his hands.

Because we live in a meritocracy, this sounds alien. The gospel is an anomaly in a culture that runs on self-definition, self-help, and self-realization. But for those who have reached the bitter end of identity building, competency maintenance, and future building, it is the greatest news imaginable. In the gospel, God declares us presentable before he ever even looks at our record. The gospel says, “Stop striving to build an identity; you have been given one free of charge because of the striving of another in your place! You no longer have to live in order to build an identity, but you can live into the identity that has been given to you.”



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