

**Pray for David and Daye**

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors on Staff at North Shore Alliance. And like David and Daye, I've put my hope in Jesus, and Jesus is giving me hope today, tomorrow, for the future. Let me encourage you to put your trust in Him today; He is faithful.

As I begin this morning, I want to ask you awaken your imagination. *I want you to suppose with me that you've never been to church service, never seen one on t.v., never heard one described.* But suppose you have a Christian friend, a decent enough guy or girl, pretty normal anyways, and they hassled you enough that you made a decision to explore the spiritual side of life.

Suppose you heard them talk about church, but you weren't sure what good could come out of connecting to a church...I mean, it's not like the church gets a lot of good press...and if the church is constantly getting slagged, maybe it's for good reason?

But let's say, on a whim, you decided you would crack open a Bible and check out what God has to say about His church...what do you think you'd find? Would you find something boring, out of date, and irrelevant? Or would you find something interesting, engaging, and alive? *What would you find?*

In the last few years, I've been rethinking what it means to be the church. Often, when people hear the word "church" their mind projects images of buildings, long lists of rules, and a dull Sunday services. Is this what we mean by church? Maybe we need to do more than rethink church...maybe we need to rebrand the word altogether.

Here's a question: why do most people think about church as being an organization, a structure, or a hierarchy, when God describes it primarily as a living organism?<sup>1</sup> In his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul refers to the church as being like a field, a body, or a temple that houses the life of God. It's God's life, it's His presence that makes the church a living, pulsating entity.

Or what about the church's place in society? Erwin McManus talks about environmental adaption as being a part of the created order. He writes, "Species that do not adapt to change do not survive because change is an ever-present reality."<sup>2</sup> Again, what about the church? Have we adapted to the changing world around us? The message of Jesus doesn't change, both it and He are timeless, but what about our methods? Does the way we speak and live communicate the message of Jesus?

People talk about Vancouver being a secular city but I'm not sure we can really make that claim. Vancouver may not be Christian, but it is "spiritual". McManus writes, "Today we are not moving towards a

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<sup>1</sup> Erwin Raphael McManus, *an unstoppable force*, 14.

<sup>2</sup> McManus, 16.

godless land but to a land with many gods.”<sup>3</sup> The question is: *as followers of Jesus, do we know how to be one voice among many? And, can Christ’s church thrive in such a climate?* It has before, and I’m convinced it can again.

A related question: *Is the church relevant anymore? And what does it even mean to be “relevant”?* Does it mean that we give people whatever they want? Is that being relevant, or is that promoting consumerism? Have we elevated our preferences and pushed God’s purposes to the margins?

But getting back to my earlier question...*is the church still relevant?* I suppose the real question is, *when did hope stop being relevant?* Or human dignity? Or meaning, or life, or intimacy, or wholeness, or destiny? Jesus, and His church, has something to say about each of these things. But for the church to be relevant, we will need to enter the conversation. In order to be relevant on a societal level, we need to start being relevant on a relational level with people we already know.

I wonder, in our desire to be relevant, have we forgotten that the message of Jesus will be offensive to many? Have we become so interested in our own comfort and conflict-free-existence that we’ve forgotten that danger and risk are intimately tied to following Him? Have we tamed the gospel message? Have tried to make Jesus so politically correct and palatable that He no longer has the ability to shock, challenge, or change anyone?

**Illus:** I came across an interesting statistic this past week. When it comes to measuring national obesity rates, Canada weighs in at # 11 in the world...11th heaviest that is. In a few hours time, the Grey Cup will be underway...and 52,000 fans who are in desperate need of exercise will crowd into B.C. Place to watch 24 players on a field who are in desperate need of rest. As a nation, Canada is getting fatter...we are overfed and under exercised.

And I wonder, could we say the same when it comes to the church? Are we spending too much time “learning” and too little time “being” or “doing”? Do we know more than we practice? Learning is supposed to be for the sake of living, isn’t it? What’s the purpose of knowing more about God when we don’t put into practice what we already know? Maybe we need to ditch the university model and take up the apprenticeship model. Maybe what we really need is some on the job training.

It’s time to rethink church. What did God intend for us? Are we simply an irrelevant gathering, or are we something much more? I believe God intends for His church to be a movement, a living force in His world.

This week we are starting a new sermon series focussed on Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth. If you were to read Paul’s letter in the original Greek language you would find the word “*ekklesia*” littered throughout; it’s the word we translate “church”.

The thing is, this word “*ekklesia*” wasn’t a religious word, it was an everyday word derived from the verb “to call out”. *Ekklesia* was a

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<sup>3</sup> McManus, 29.

call for people to gather. One might talk about a gathering for the sake of politics, or a gathering of one's family, or a city-wide gathering of some sort.

The word *ekklesia* appears in the New Testament 114 times; Paul himself uses it 62 times.<sup>4</sup> But Paul takes this common word, *ekklesia...the church*, and invests it with new meaning. So what was Paul on about? What does God see in the church anyway?

It's time to rethink church...and the letter we refer to as 1 Corinthians will serve as our guide in the months to come. In this letter Paul casts a vision of a church, rightly related to God, to one another, and to the world. May God give us ears to hear, and courage to follow.

## **Pray**

**Introduction to Corinth:** Before I get to our text this morning, let me take a few minutes to give you a sketch of the ancient city of Corinth. If you were to visit Corinth today, the ruins you would encounter would suggest that this was once a prosperous, commercial city, with numerous shops, temples, and public buildings.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 124.

<sup>5</sup> Accordance, photo section.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: 1 Corinthians*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Richard B. Hays, *Interpretation Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Hays, 1.

Now if you were looking to open a coffee shop, you'd need to think "location, location, location;" not surprisingly, the reason Corinth was a happening place was because of its location. Corinth was situated on an Isthmus, and as such, was "the master of two harbours," one leading to Asia and the other leading to Italy. The regular influx of trade brought money into Corinth, and money brought people. Gordon Fee says of Corinth, "[it] was at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world."<sup>6</sup>

Corinth was a city that was ethnically, religiously, and economically diverse; this diversity was reflected in the makeup of the church. When God's church gathered it was multi-ethnic, multi-generational, and included the entire spectrum of social and economic classes.<sup>7</sup>

In the ancient world, this much diversity, coming together voluntarily, was highly unusual. It continues to be highly unusual today, but this is the church.

One final word and then we'll dive into the text. If we want to read Paul's letter well, then we need to realize that when we read this letter "we are literally reading somebody else's mail".<sup>8</sup> Paul wasn't writing to an individual but to an entire church; he was writing to a

community that had a specific set of challenges. And while Paul may not have us in mind as he wrote this letter, God did. The Holy Spirit inspired Paul in his writing, and it turns out that many of Corinth's challenges are no different than our own. And so, as one author writes, while this letter was not written to us, we learn to read it as though it were.<sup>9</sup>

If you have your Bibles with you this morning, let me encourage you to turn with me to 1 Corinthians 1:1-3. If you are using the Blue Bibles in front of you, you can find our text on page 1771.

**Read:** *1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, 2 To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: 3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul opens his letter using a standard form of greeting in the ancient world: the name of the writer, the name of addressee, and a brief greeting. In these opening verses, Paul is setting the stage for the entire letter. Paul begins by addressing issues of identity and calling. With his greeting, he begins to answer the question: *who is He, and who are we?* If we are going to think rightly about what it means to be the church, then we need to begin with God Himself.

**God:** If you were to take out all the references to God in these opening verses there would be holes everywhere...the same is true if you remove God's presence from church.

**Illus:** Nicky Gumbel, a pastor in the Church of England (and the founder of the Alpha Course), tells the following story. He says that a lot of people have been leaving the Anglican Church as of late...so many in fact that some have suggested that even God has left the Anglican Church.

He quotes from an article in an English Newspaper, The Private Eye, entitled "*God To Leave Church of England*". It goes on, "Following the example set by leading former Anglicans, God has indicated that He too is to leave the Church of England...According to sources close to God, He's been unhappy for some time with the direction the Anglican Church has been taking and has now finally had enough. A Church of England spokesman said, 'Losing God is a bit of a blow... but it's just something we're going to have to learn to live with.'"

*Losing God is a bit of a blow?* If you take God out of the picture, we may have a gathering but we no longer have a church. Without God, we may have a social club, a charitable organization, or a task group, but we no longer have a church. God is the central being in the universe. He is the Creator and Sustainer of all life. Like the planets revolve around the Sun, everything revolves around Him. So many people in this world have no idea that all of life revolves around His life, but the church...this is core to our identity: we belong to Him.

### **Identity and Calling**

Now let's take a few minutes and go through these three verses and discover what God say about issues of identity and calling.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

- **Calling:** In the first verse we read, “*Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*”.

Paul was *called* by God, and *set apart* to be an apostle. This word apostle means “messenger” or “sent one”. Paul was *called* by God, and *set apart* to be a witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul stresses that he was called by *the will of God*. In other words, God chose him, not the other way around.

Every so often you will hear people talk about having a calling. But if you think about it, in order to have a calling, there must be One who calls, One who invites, One who chooses. Years before he wrote to the Corinthians, something happened to Paul...He met the Risen Jesus...he was apprehended by Jesus and taken off the path he was on. That’s how calling works; we don’t choose our calling, the One who calls chooses us.

And you too have been called. Now don’t dismiss what I’ve just said...at least not right away. God’s calling on our lives doesn’t depend on our worthiness, it depends on His mercy. Do you remember what Paul was doing when he was called? He was hunting down people from churches, throwing them in jail, and voting to have them executed. When Jesus called Paul, Paul had nothing to offer.

In a letter to his young protege Timothy, Paul wrote the following, “*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as*

*an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.*”<sup>10</sup> If you think you are too far gone for even God, think again.

“*Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God*”. Paul begins by talking about his own calling but very quickly he begins to talk about the call of God on the Corinthian church. Maybe you don’t have a relationship with God, not yet anyway; maybe you don’t even know where to begin. Well...it begins with Jesus, He calls us into relationship with God the Father. He’s calling you, He’s calling every single one of us; will we answer His call?

In vs. 2 Paul writes, “*To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people*”. And here it is...our identity and calling all wrapped up in one. “*To the church of God in Corinth*” . Now remember, this word “church” simply means “*a gathering*”. So let me rephrase what Paul is saying, “To God’s church, in Corinth,” in other words, “To God’s people, gathered in Corinth,” in other words: “*To the people of God, called by Jesus Christ, and gathered in His name.*”

This is who we are: the people of God, called by Jesus Christ, and gathered in His name. Whenever the people of God, called by Jesus, gather in His name, church happens. “Church” can happen in a coffee shop, on a beach, in a home on Thursday nights. Church isn’t a building, an organization, or a Sunday service, “church” happens whenever and wherever God’s people gather.

Most of us have grown up with labels that we wear everywhere we go. Labels like, short or tall, interesting or boring, successful or

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Timothy 1:15-16.

unsuccessful, married/single or divorced, rich or poor, Canadian, South African, American, British or Chinese...we've got labels, and we all assigns labels to others.

But when we are called by Jesus, if we respond, the old labels no longer fit our new identity. When we say "yes" to following Jesus, we get new labels. Now, we are: the chosen, the called, the set apart ones, those being made holy, we are sons or daughters, we are loved by God, *we are the people of God, called by Jesus Christ, and gathered in His name*. This is who we are, and by the grace of God, this is who we are becoming.

If we don't who we are, we will never be able to embrace our calling. We do have a calling, if we've responded to Jesus' invitation. And now I want to turn our attention to this calling we've received.

- **vs. 2:** "To the church of God in Corinth, **sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people**".

"Sanctified" isn't a common word; you'll probably never hear it walking around Lonsdale Quay. In fact, the word "sanctified" isn't even an everyday word in the church...but maybe it should be. "*Sanctified*" means "*set apart*" or "*dedicated to*;" it's a word with a rich history in the Old Testament.

The Temple in Jerusalem was set apart, or dedicated to, the worship of God. Every instrument or utensil that was used in the Temple, was sanctified, set apart for a holy purpose. And while the Temple could

never "contain" God, it was said to be the place where He chose to dwell.

We too have been set apart, and called for a holy purpose, namely, to be His holy people. Through Jesus, we have been called to be His holy people and to represent Him on this earth. God no longer dwells in a Temple made of costly stones; He has chosen instead to indwell His church, His gathered people. *We are the people of God, called by Jesus Christ, gathered in His name, and filled with His Presence*.

We've been set apart in Jesus, and called to be holy. The word "holy" has either been so misused, or gotten such a bad rap that I'm not sure all of us even know what we're talking about when we use the word "holy".

Typically, at least outside of a Christian context, when we hear the word "holy" it's being used as an adjective: "holy cow," "holy smokes," or "holy something else".

Unfortunately, the word "holy" has become a loaded word in our day; many people equate "holiness" with a "holier-than-thou" kind of superiority. Needless to say, this is not what Paul had in mind. But, neither are we to put holy living on the shelf because it makes others uncomfortable. To be holy is to participate in the life of God, to be connected to Him so that He lives through us.

We need to rethink church...in wanting to relate to the world around us, have we lost any distinctiveness? If there is a fundamental difference between the life God lives and the life others lead, shouldn't there be a fundamental difference in our lives as well?

Gordon Fee writes, “precisely because [we] are ‘set apart’ for God, [we] must also bear the character of the God who has...set [us] apart.”<sup>11</sup>

As we make our way through Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, what we will find is that they were no different than we are: living as God’s holy people is not our strong suit. In many ways we may look far more like the North Shore than we do like God’s holy people on the North Shore.<sup>12</sup> My dear friends...God doesn’t want us to blend in, we’re supposed to stand out.

Holiness doesn’t happen overnight...it is God’s work in us, over our lifetime. God calls us to be set apart in this world, and then He begins to take the world out of us. Our tendency is to think and act in ways that are “normal” here on the North Shore, but as we are united to Jesus’ life, we are ushered into a “new normal”.

Paul regularly reminds us that we have been united with Christ and what is His is now ours. And so, God’s invitation is to *become what we already are*...His holy people.

**Conclusion:** I want to end this message with the concluding words of Paul’s greeting. In vs. 3 Paul writes, “*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*”

The typical Jewish greeting was centered around the word “shalom;” this is the word we translate to mean “peace”. More often than not, when we talk about “peace,” we mean little more than the absence of conflict. When people talk about “peace in the Middle East,” they are hoping for the end of war and violence. And while this is certainly not a bad thing to hope for, this Jewish word “shalom” is far more more expansive.

To experience biblical shalom/peace, is to experience wholeness and well-being. An experience of shalom in a marriage goes far beyond calling a cease-fire; it includes a love, a depth, a wholeness and a vibrancy. Experiencing God’s shalom in a church includes putting aside bickering, gossiping, and jealousy, but it also includes a oneness, a unity, a moving together in a common direction. God doesn’t want us to just “get by” in relationship, He has abundance in store for us.

But before Paul even gets to the word “peace/shalom,” he modifies the traditional Jewish greeting by including the word “grace”. “Grace”...there is no sweeter word in the English language. This word “grace” is the banner under which God’s love, mercy, and forgiveness falls. *It is by grace that Jesus calls us, and saves us.*

We are not called because we are “better” than other people around us. We are not called because we ourselves have measured up to God’s holy standard. We are called, and saved because of God’s grace. God is love...He loves all that He has made. And as a Father

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<sup>11</sup> Fee, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Fee, 33.

has compassion on His children, so God desires to have compassion on us.

God the Father loved the world so much that He sent Jesus, His Son. Jesus didn't come to condemn you, me, or the world; He came that we might be saved. In these two words, "*grace and peace*," God has made plain what He intends for those who receive Jesus. God has poured out His grace (His love, mercy, and forgiveness) in Jesus, and when we choose to follow Jesus we are ushered into shalom (wholeness, well-being, peace).

If you have not already done so, choose to follow Jesus today. And if you've already made that decision, do not shrink back from following Him more closely today, or tomorrow. His grace is for you, and His plan is to usher you into the shalom your heart desires.

**Illus:** A few months ago, Naomi and I went to my 20 year grad reunion and I bumped into a friend of mine that I hadn't seen in nearly 20 years. He had heard that I had become a pastor and he said to me, "*I've never really been very religious, but of all the people I know, you're the kind of person who should be a pastor...in high school, you were always such a good person...you were one of the few people I respected.*"

We talked for a few minutes and then I began talking with someone else, but when I moved on, He continued the conversation with Naomi. He said, "*You know...your husband was a really good person in high school, and now he's a pastor...do you ever, you know...put your husband up on a pedestal?*" Doesn't every wife? He was dead serious. And Naomi, my sweet Naomi, responded saying, "*No...I*

*don't put him on a pedestal...You do know that Mark is only human...*" But he cut her off saying, "*Yeah...but a really good one!*"

I found out that night that he lives on the North Shore, and a few weeks ago we connected over coffee. I asked him to walk me through the last 20 years of his life; when he was finished he asked me to do the same. So I began to tell him about my life, how God had guided my decisions, directed me to Naomi, strengthened me in difficulty, gave me hope when my mom died...

You know it's interesting, my friend began the conversation saying..."*I've never been very religious,*" but he ended the conversation saying, "*maybe my wife and I should check out your church, it would be good for our kids...*" But I wonder, would he find that Jesus, and His church, would be good for him?

Last week, Ruth Shareski said that in Germany, hundreds of thousands of people are disillusioned with the church and have rejected Jesus without ever really knowing Him. Perhaps you're one of the disillusioned...you're not even sure why you're here this morning. I'm glad you've come. I hope you'll come back, and discover that Jesus, and His church, are more relevant than you ever imagined.

**Pray/Worship/Benediction:** Grace to you, and Peace,  
**Announcement:** love offering, and farewell on December 11 (7-9)