

Saints Together

1 Corinthians 1:1-8 | Jonathan K. Dodson | July 5, 2014

When it comes to the church, I've noticed my tendency to complain or to spot error. Maybe you're like me in that way. It's something you have to resist, by surrendering to the Holy Spirit, to also see and be thankful for the good in the church, in people. To spot and celebrate evidences of growth. Spending time in Paul's shoes, I've want to tell you how thankful I am for you. You are the church, the manifold wisdom of God, the spotless Bride, the holy City of God, and over the years I've seen many of you grow into this by living less for yourself into more for others. I've seen remarkable acts of service and generosity, people discover their gifts and use them serve one another, make disciples, become leaders, baptize and bless this city. I'm thankful for you, to be the church with you. A few years ago, when we met in the HighBall, I preached through 1 Timothy to lay the foundation for our new church—elders, deacons, ministry of men & women. Now that the foundation is set, it's time to build on the foundation, not with hay wood straw but gold and silver. It is time to mature. How? In a pluralistic, creative, playful, status hungry city like Corinth, we need the vision of Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians—*Saints Together*. That's 1 Corinthians in two words. There's a lot to that phrase, and some things to sort out. A word like "saints" or "holy" can bring to mind all kinds of images that are flat out wrong. So lets: 1) Clarify what holiness is, 2) Consider how we pursue it *together* and 3) See what causes it. I believe the next five months are very important for our church. How we respond to this letter, will determine what we become *and* what we leave behind for our kids, one another & city.

Vocational Saints

This inspired letter from Saint Paul begins with an emphasis on **calling**. The word appears five times in the first chapter (1:1,2,9,24, 26). In a city where the median age is 31, many people are still trying to settle into their calling. We are transient, jumping from job to job, house to house, city to city, in pursuit of our call. We're fastidious about it, comparing job opportunities, salaries, quality of life, cities of choice, retirement benefits, charting our path as if calling is something we discover, by ourselves. We might ask God to bless it. But *this* approach to calling effectively removes the Caller from your life. Has more in common with the impersonal notion of destiny. But calling actually assumes a personal Caller, *who knows you and calls you into something good*, like the coach who picks out a kid on the basketball team and urges him to stick with it because he's made for bball. Here's what we are made for: "to [the church of God that is in Corinth called to be saints](#)" (1:2; cf. Rom 1). We are made to be saints. What is a **saint**? Mother Theresa? A pious killjoy? When we hear this word, we often think of prohibitions, and it does include some of those, but holiness is much larger. The word holy or saint refers to someone or something **set apart**. In the OT all kinds of things were holy: temple, utensils, ark, priests, or *the whole Jewish people*. What do they all have in common? They were set apart *to God*. A saint is a person who is apart to God, *close* to God, in proximity to his presence. "[Godliness puts a man in heaven before his time](#)", says Thomas Watson. How so? It puts you so close to the blazing light of God that you look heavenly. In his book *The Great Divorce*, CSL describes people who are transported by bus from hell to the land at the foot of the mountains, before heaven. When they arrive, they are met by luminous Solid People, while they themselves turn ghostly. The Solid spirit People are the saints. One is described as: "[an enthroned shining god whose ageless spirit](#)

weighed upon mine like a burden of solid gold.” Another saint has a face that shines, as with tears, but it is actually “the liquid love and brightness which flowed from him.” Another is a radiant woman whose almost visible penumbra of courtesy and joy appears as a shining train behind her, people are happy in her presence. Do see what they all have in common? Light. Where does it come from? God. *Glory flows into everyone, and back from everyone: like light and mirrors. But the light’s the thing.* A saint isn’t a killjoy but embodied joy, a person who shines with the light of heaven *because they are close to God.* Don’t you want to be like that? To be close to God? To be vocational *saints.*

Holy Together

Now, how do we do it? How can we be put in heaven before our time? Well, we need a couple things that go hand in hand. First, we need *one another* to be saints **together**. Holiness is communal. This is why Paul reminds us “*God is faithful and has called you into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*” (1:9). The you is plural, and fellowship, *koinonia*, requires sharing or partnering together. You can tell what a community partners in by what they talk about together. A non-profit community that cares about fresh water in Africa talks about wells and Africa. A community that cares about Christ and imitating him talks about holiness and its challenges. They partner together in it. There are many challenges to vocational holiness, and Paul knows this about the Corinthians. We have to know our challenges. Paul knows the Corinthians are often set apart to something else. See, **without holiness, something else has to define you. You have to be set apart to something else**—your appearance, your reputation, your pleasures. In Corinth the prevailing wisdom of the day elevated status and pleasure. After the Romans rebuilt Corinth, it became one of the great cities where people sought public recognition. Many people sought public inscriptions in buildings, where they could make a name for themselves, to carve out *status*. Many of the problems in the church can be attributed to going with this cultural flow, of being citizens set apart to other things and not saints together. In this letter, we will encounter sins reveal our surrender to cultural currents: sexual promiscuity, divisive behavior, cliquishness, selfish freedom. How do we resist, go against the currents, and holiness as saints *together*? If you’re going to take your calling seriously, shine with liquid love and brightness, you’ll need one another. In Sundays, City Groups, and Fight Clubs dig in to challenge, pray, encourage, model, and love one another into this collective holiness. Ask hard questions, give good counsel. The second related thing we need is **wisdom**. Prevailing wisdom sets morality on a spectrum. Novelist Jonathan Franzen tells a story of five brothers who lived in a mansion. Four of them lived in the comfort and beauty in the older wing. The youngest brother was strange and was forced to live in the newer wing, raw and not well furnished. So he worked hard to furnish in it with a Puritan work ethic. He disapproved of his brothers’ lax morals, as they partied constantly in the older wing, but he was loyal to them. He did incredibly well, but one night ended up fooling around with Georgina, a dirty girl from an ambitious family. The next morning her family showed up at his door and insisted on a wedding. She mocked his brothers’ loose morality and took his money and gave it away to her parents. The mansion was filled with unhappiness. Her parents came to him and said, you must learn to hate your brothers and trust us. His brothers come to him and said, your wife is a hag and as long as she is in this house, you’re no brother of ours. The rich little brother clutched his head and wept. What’s this story about? It’s the two ends of a moral spectrum, reinforced by

community. You live in liberal community, partying with the brothers of loose morals or you can cozy up to the conservatives who have tight morals, but either one will fail you. Conservative communities will *use* you and liberal communities will *forget* you. This is the wisdom of the world—a **centerless society**—where finite communities create the moral options. Liberal and conservative communities aren't enough. We need a center to become a mature, ripening with age kind of people. We need more than the subjective word on the street, or prevailing cultural convention, we need a wisdom not of this age: [“Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory”](#) (1 Cor 2:6-7). What is the wisdom of God? Christ crucified. The death of the Lord of glory. How does that help? The word “glory” combines heaviness with light, gravity with goodness. The Lord of glory provides a center, a gravitational pull of goodness that doesn't change with the made-up morals of liberal and conservative communities. The Lord of glory truer and greater. How? He's the divine community, Father son and spirit, who speaks from the outside into the world. He doesn't look to finite circles of friends. He is the light of goodness. The light by which we see all other lights. He is not conditioned by liberal greed or conservative hate; he is thoroughgoing goodness. The problem is that if you get close to him you'll burn up next to the flame of his purity, unless he can do something with your darkness. The wisdom of God is the unexpected death of the Lord of glory. He willingly pulls your darkness into himself and is executed, crucified, so that you can get off the spectrum and find a center. He won't forget or use you; he'll forgive and dignify you. When we take our sins to a God that bright and that humble we can't help but change. The wisdom of the cross is *for our glory*. The cross gets us close the burning center of God's glory, so that his glory can flow through us in collective holiness. If we will do this, what we have to give to one another is richer and better, and we sparkle with the light of Heaven. Others notice and a new *cross-centered* community is formed. God's vision for isn't a community of flickering pixels but communities of glory, embedded in the neighborhoods of Austin, gathering on Sundays, renewing the city with the power of a Holy Center. Holy *Together*.

Being Yourself

As we conclude, it's important to remember that while [Glory flows into everyone, and back from everyone: like light and mirrors...the light's the thing](#). The Light is the Thing, our God is our Glory. To be saints together, we must continually come back to the light, like moths to a bulb. The Lord of Glory is the thing that sanctifies us. But does this mean if we don't recenter ourselves enough, that we won't become a solid saint of heaven? Is all of this really spiritualized self-improvement? Look back at how Paul first named the Corinthians: [to the church in Corinth sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together](#). Sanctified and saint have the same root word—holy. What's he saying? He is saying that you have already been sanctified in Christ Jesus. God sees you through the center of Christ's love and glory. So holiness isn't spiritualized self-help; it's simply being who you already are in Jesus, enjoying his fellowship, becoming the player your coach always knew you would be. Jesus isn't telling you to be someone you're not; he is asking you to be who you already are. Stop getting distracted by off-court drama, get out there and be the player, be the saint, he's made you to be. Remember the person who's face was liquid love and light? They weren't always that way. When we first meet him he has a lizard on his shoulder he doesn't want to

get rid of, but a Solid Spirit called the Burning One tells him if he wants to come to the mountains he'll have to get rid of it. The burning Spirit moves closer to him reaching toward the lizard. He objects, "That burns! I thought you said it wouldn't hurt." I didn't say it wouldn't hurt I said it wouldn't kill you. With his permission, the Burning One rips the lizard off and throws it writhing to the ground. Then, it begins to grow, and the man with it. The ghostly man becomes an immense, radiant solid person, and his lizard of lust is transformed into a brilliant steed. The man throws himself at the feet of the Burning One, and embraces him. When he rises, his face shines with liquid love and light, but first he had to give up his lizard. We will have to give up things as we draw close to the Burning One. It will hurt but it will also transform us into *saints together*. He mounts the steed of virtue and rides off into the mountains. [Godliness puts a man in heaven before his time.](#)