

July 10, 2011

The National Presbyterian Church

# Called To Be Saints

I Corinthians 1:1-17

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If you haven't been paying attention we are only five days away from the American premiere of "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2." It's the eighth film based on the seven Harry Potter novels by J. K. Rowling. (I will not try to explain why seven books require eight movies.) That's 17 ½ hours of film and 4,176 pages of print. This morning's newspaper tells me there are 150 intercollegiate Quidditch teams now competing.<sup>i</sup> The books have sold something like 450 million copies and have been translated into 67 languages.

The first novel, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (that's "...the Sorcerer's Stone" in the United States) appeared fourteen years ago in June, 1997. Where did all this come from? Jo Rowling explains, "I was on the train when I suddenly had this basic idea of a boy who didn't know who he was."<sup>ii</sup> It all began with "a boy who didn't know who he was" and it makes for terrific reading.

The Apostle Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians has also been widely published and translated into many languages. Where does this epistle come from? Why does Paul pick up his pen to write? The situation is much the same: the Christian community in Corinth is a church that

didn't know who it was. In these first verses Paul tries to remind them who they are.

Certainly the church at Corinth didn't think that it didn't know who it was. These opening verses are crowded with their sense of themselves and they insistently tell us who they thought they were. "Each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." It is admirable they had such strong loyalties but their loyalties threaten to obscure their identity.

I suppose some explanation is called for here. "I belong to Paul": Paul began the church in Corinth. He stayed there nearly two years. Many of people in the church in Corinth would have been called to Christ by Paul's preaching. Paul was their father in faith.

After Paul left, Apollos came to Corinth, hence, "I belong to Apollos." Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria (don't be fooled by the Greek name). Alexandria was known for its school of rhetoric. It seems likely Apollos was a very eloquent preacher. I knew a preacher who claimed he could listen to another preacher five minutes and tell if the preacher were trained at Princeton. There was a "Princeton voice." Apollos was eloquent; some Corinthians complained that Paul was not eloquent (2 Cor 10:10).

"I belong to Cephas," chirped another group. Cephas is Peter. There is no record of Peter traveling to Corinth, but perhaps it was emissaries from Peter and the Jerusalem church who had preached and taught there. A loyalty had formed, and this faction traced its faithfulness back to the disciples at the Sea of Galilee, a very impressive lineage indeed.

Biblical scholars can be puzzled by "I belong to Christ." Isn't that the point Paul makes? Don't they all belong to Christ? Hang around the church for a while and

you will understand. “I belong to Christ,” which is to say: you do not... or... not as much as I do. You cannot possibly disagree with me and belong to Christ. Christ and me, me and Christ, we’re just like this.

Paul writes, “It has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.” The fact of the matter is that the divisions between loyalties to preachers are only one disagreement.

The Corinthian church has issues. Can you imagine a church divided about issues? There are meat-eaters and there are vegetarians—or actually between those who eat meat sacrificed in pagan temples and those who will not eat it. Almost all the meat available had been ritually sacrificed. You could not find any nice Christian ground sirloin anywhere. They had issues about marriage and sexuality. Some people spoke in tongues feeling superior to those who did not speak it tongues. They had a group that did not believe in the resurrection and another group who believed they were already living the resurrection life. They had issues in Corinth and before poor old Paul is done writing he stumbles around giving advice on hair styles and expressing shock that women might pray in church without covering their heads.

We are so fortunate that the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century knows how to handle these problems. It is simply a matter of marketing. You need different churches for these different tastes and different issues and different religious preferences. “Religious preference” is a recently minted term to speak of this. Sociologist Peter Berger explains, “The term derives from the world of consumer choices—one prefers this brand of breakfast cereal to that one.”<sup>iii</sup>

You belong to Paul?—you belong to that church. You belong to Apollos?—you go to that one. You speak in tongues?—the Pentecostal church is around the corner. You disagree with the fellow in the next pew?—start a new

church, everyone does it. Isn't that what the church is for?—to satisfy our needs and cater to our taste?

Paul's letter could have been a short note if only he had known about marketing. Different churches for different people, custom tailored Christianity, what an idea! There's only one thing wrong with it. It's a lie.

David Wells, Distinguished Research Professor at Gordon Conwell, has written:

*The fact is that while we may be able to market the church, we cannot market Christ, the gospel, Christian character, or meaning in life. . . . neither Christ nor his truth can be marketed by appealing to consumer interest, because the premise of all marketing is that the consumer's need is sovereign, that the consumer is always right, and that is what the gospel insists cannot be the case.<sup>iv</sup>*

When Paul addresses the church in Corinth in the first verses of this letter he does not insult them by addressing them as the results of market analysis; Paul does not describe them sociologically in terms of “religious preference”; and he does not name them by the sundry psychological and economic motivations that might have caused them to join the church.

Paul names the church theologically. Paul names himself theologically. A number of you have mentioned your amusement at the way I began my first sermon from this pulpit: “Here I am; and there you are.” That's how Paul begins his letters. Here I am, he says: “Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God”; and there you are, he says: “the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.”

To Christians who have reduced the church to the size of their loyalties, who have shrunk the church to the

dimensions of their issues, who think faith is how they feel about things, Paul speaks theologically, naming himself “called to be an apostle” and naming them “those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.”

They are called. It is not about their choices and their preferences. They are called. Paul has to get this right from the beginning of his letter because if these Christians don’t understand who they are theologically then the next 16 chapters of the letter are not going to make much sense. Theological language is denser in these sixteen verses than anywhere in the letter. God is named 6 times in 9 verses; Jesus Christ, 10 times in 10 verses. God calls us to be saints. Victor Furnish at Southern Methodist University has written extensively on the Corinthian correspondence and tells us, “When we have come to terms with what Paul is saying about knowing God and belonging to Christ, we shall be very close to the theological center of 1 Corinthians.”<sup>v</sup>

That we are “called to be saints” is not a marketable notion. It is God’s idea and God’s purpose to be served. Some things are arranged for commonplace use, others are set aside for holy purposes, to be a saint is the latter. God calls us in order to set us apart for God’s work of blessing.

These stained glass windows let the light shine through; that’s the work of the saints of God. Sometimes after meetings late at night I come into the sanctuary. It’s a quiet, refreshing place, but I can tell you that at 11 p.m. these stained glass windows don’t look like much. We don’t look like much—we certainly don’t look like what we think saints ought to look like—but when God’s light shines through us... that’s another matter.

There is clarity in knowing we are “called to be saints”; there is power in knowing who you are.

I don’t know if Fred Craddock has ever preached here at The National Presbyterian Church. Fred has been to

me a teacher, a mentor and friend, and for more than thirty years, a Barnabas—a great encourager. Fred is a storyteller supreme; and there is a favorite story Fred tells of vacationing back in his home state of Tennessee. It was the last night of vacation and they decided to splurge.

The restaurant had an enormous picture window with a view of the Smokey Mountains and menu prices to match the size of the view.

Fred and his wife Nettie were enjoying the view when right between the salad and main course, an elderly gentleman approached their table and introduced himself. "Ya'll aren't from around here," he observed.

"No," Fred said, "we're on vacation. We used to live in Tennessee. We live in Oklahoma now." He tried to be polite to this man barging in on their dinner.

"Well, what do you in Oklahoma?"

"Well," Fred said, drawing a deep breath, "I teach New Testament and Preaching."

"Oh, you're a preacher. I know a story about a preacher," and he pulled up a chair and sat down at their table.

"Great," Fred thought to himself, "Make yourself at home! I was just dying to hear 'a preacher story'--never can hear enough of those--most of 'em limped off the Ark with Noah and his family."

"I was born in these mountains," the old man began, his hand gesturing in a sweep to the view out the picture window. "My mother was not married. The shame that came to her in our small town also fell upon me. When we walked down the street people looked suspiciously at me, wondering whose I really was and guessing who my father might be. At school they called me names. At recess I hid from their stares and looks. I ate lunch alone.

"When I was, oh, 'bout twelve years old, a new preacher came to town. He was tall and boney and had a

craggy face. Wore one of those old frock coats. He had a sternness but gentleness about him, and I began slipping into the church to hear what he might say. I would slide in after worship began and sit on the very back pew, afraid someone would see me and ask, 'What's a boy like you doin' in church?,' and I would leave during the last hymn so no one would see me or say anything.

"I had been doing that for several weeks when one Sunday some people had sat around me, and I could not get out quickly. All these people! I tried to make my way through them to get out of that church but I was caught in the line at the door. All of a sudden I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the preacher. I looked up into that leathery face. He looked down at me, looked hard, right into my face as if he were searching for something.

"'Whose boy are you, son?,' he asked.

"And I thought, 'Oh no! Not here! He's gonna make some guess.'

"'Wait a minute,' said the preacher, 'I see it now. I know who you are. There's a distinct resemblance here, it's written all over your face. You're . . . you're . . . why, you're a child of God.'

"And he swatted me on the seat of my britches and said, 'Go out and claim your inheritance, boy!'"

The old man's story was finished. Fred asked, "What did you say your name was?"

"Ben Hooper."

"Ben Hooper? Ben Hooper." Fred says, "I remembered that my father once told me that the people of Tennessee twice elected as Governor an illegitimate: Ben Hooper."

"I was born that day, right here in these mountains," the old man said.<sup>vi</sup>

We are “called to be saints,” and there is power in knowing that, there is freedom and power in knowing who you truly are.

So if someone asks you why you came to The National Presbyterian Church this morning don’t give them some small psychological business about it “meeting your needs,” and don’t offer up some sociological stuff about “religious preferences,” and don’t say that the marketing fits your educational and economic profile. Give that person a large, robust, theological answer: that God invited you here and you could not imagine turning down such a gracious invitation.

God calls us; God calls us to be saints.

“I belong to Paul,” “I belong to Apollos,” “I belong to Cephas”: that’s not wrong or bad, it’s just too small. When we define ourselves in terms of what divides us we sell ourselves short. We are more than that; God calls us to more than that. With the sanctified imagination that is among God’s gifts to us we can dream the great things God hopes for us in calling us to be the saints of God. With the power of God’s truth animating our knowledge of who we are and are meant to be we can shine with nothing less than the grace and glory of God.

### **THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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<sup>i</sup> Tracy Begland, “Crazy for Quidditch,” *Parade*, July 10, 2011, p. 4.

<sup>ii</sup> Manohla Dargis and A. O. Scott, “The Fans Own the Magic,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 2011, AR 1.

<sup>iii</sup> Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions Without Becoming a Fanatic* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 17-8.

<sup>iv</sup> David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Erdmans: Grand Rapids, 1994), 82.

<sup>v</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, *The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 29.

<sup>vi</sup> Transcribed by the preacher from a taped sermon of Dr. Fred Craddock, with enormous gratitude.