

Empire Church of the Brethren

Sunday Service Sermons

04 October 2026

How do you describe an Elephant?

Text: "To the church of God, which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours". *1 Cor. 1:2* from *1 Cor. 1:1-19*.

Describing what one has seen is not easy.

It can vary from person to person who viewed the scene.

Such as this example: A king called on three blind men to describe an elephant.

The first, who was touching a leg, said, "An elephant is much like a tree trunk."

The second blind man, who was holding on to the tail, said, "An elephant is like a snake. It is much smaller around than a tree and does not come to the ground."

The third blind man reached for the elephant and felt its trunk. He said, "You are both wrong. The elephant is like a giant vacuum cleaner."

Remember the phrase: In the eye of the beholder?

Or how about, I would not have seen it if I had not believed it.

I understand most history is now in question because of the point of view of the person who wrote it.

It is hard to get past ourselves.

Descriptions of the church are much like this story of the three blind men and the elephant.

Each person who comes into contact with the church has a different impression of what the church is like.

What is "The Church" to you?

The church is a geographical location.

The least appropriate answer to our question is that the church is a geographical location.

Paul wrote his longest and most practical letter to the church at Corinth, one of the four most important cities of that day.

A "sunbelt city" of the time, Corinth was on a narrow isthmus linking northern and southern Greece and had the strategic value of Panama.

This was the city of Corinth.

But a church is far more than a geographical location.

Its geography is only incidental.

We live in a time when many denominations include some geographical reference in their official name, for example, the Church of England or the Empire Church of the Brethren.

We would do well to see the potential danger of allowing geographical boundaries to circumscribe theological and missionary vision.

A church is more than where it happens to be located.

The church is a building.

In common parlance, we refer to the church as a building.

Biblically speaking a church is far more than an edifice of mortar, stone, carpet, and pews.

And so it was for the Corinthians.

The Corinthians had no "official" church building.

Instead, the congregation gathered in private homes, hearing messages from Paul read by the pale light of an oil lamp.

A church is more than a building.

The church is “of God.”

If the church is neither a building nor a geographical location, then just what is the church?

Verse 2 explicitly states that the church is “of God.”

In addition, Paul mentions some form of the name of Jesus no fewer than ten times in the first nine verses of *1 Corinthians*.

The church is indeed “of God.”

It centers around Christ.

Paul uses the word for church twenty-two times in *1 Corinthians* and nine additional times in *2 Corinthians*.

Paul speaks of the church more in his Corinthian correspondence than he does in all of his other letters combined.

In these writings, Paul stresses that the church is “of God.”

A New Testament church is not autonomous; it is theonomous.

The church does not rule itself: God rules it!

The New Testament church is not a democracy: it is a theocracy or a Christocracy.

The church is “of God.”

The truth applies in many directions.

For one thing, it helps us remember that the church belongs to God, not God to the church.

Sometimes we forget this and assume that God is the church’s magic formula to accomplish good things.

In the context of *1 Corinthians*, Paul surely means us to see something else in this description of the church.

Paul wrote this letter largely to address the problems of factions besetting the church.

Evidently many were rallying around any one of the several prominent personalities, Apollos, Peter, Paul, and Christ, and fragmenting the unity of the congregation.

So, with the very first stroke of his pen, Paul declares that the church is “of God” and this precludes the possibility that it is “of Apollos,” or “of Peter,” or “of the denomination,” or “of the parachurch.”

The church is “of God.”

The church is both local and universal.

Paul declares that the church is both local and universal.

Devout believers across the years have argued for the first one and then the other part of his definition.

The truth is that the church is both.

Paul addresses his letter “to the church of God in Corinth” and then in the same sentence writes, “with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul may have chosen his words to correct some proud Corinthians who saw themselves as the center of the Christian universe.

His words remind us as well: the local church is but one fragment of God’s entire church.

We belong to a local church meeting in a given neighborhood and to a worldwide movement as well.

A bank may have several branch offices.

Each separate branch is the bank, and then again, it is not.

It takes all of the branches together to comprise the bank.

So it is with the church.

Paul was writing to the Corinthian “branch” or manifestation of the church of God.

The church is holy.

Paul says we are “signified” in Christ, and we are “called saints.”

In the Bible “calling” is not restricted to a few of the spiritually elite or to those who attend seminary. Calling is prerequisite for Christian living.

Every Christian has responded to God’s call in Christ.

When we respond so, God “sanctifies” us, he sets us apart to do his work.

It seems preposterous to us that of all people, Paul called the Corinthians “saints”, “holy ones.”

He says this to a congregation riddled with factionalism that had lawsuits among its members, problems with sexual morality and incest, drunken observances of the Lord’s Supper, and undisciplined commotion and uncontrolled speaking in tongues in its worship.

Paul calls this church “holy” and its members “saints.”

Given modern definitions of sainthood, this seems impossible!

Then we remember: sainthood is not some future distinction but rather a present condition, namely, a response to God’s call to be set apart for his service.

The church is an expectant community.

The church is an expectant community in that it awaits what God will do in the future.

The Corinthians faith evidently centered on the ecstasy of the present moment.

“We have it all now,” some evidently said.

In verse 7 Paul said that the present does not exhaust the riches of our faith, and that we await the revealing of our Lord.

Then, in the following two verses, Paul affirms that God is faithful to preserve until the end who he calls.

We have largely lost this description of the church.

We typically do not conceive of the church as the people of God oriented toward the future.

We more usually tie the church to the “old-time religion” and the reputed glories of a distant past.

Paul contends that in reality we are awaiting the revelation of Jesus Christ.

We are looking expectantly to God’s great future.

The good news of Christ is more current than high-tech computer software and space shuttles.

The church is the people of God living in anticipation of what God is going to do.

The church is the community of grace.

No definition of the church is complete without the affirmation that the church is the community of grace.

In his greeting to the church, Paul wrote, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul pronounced God’s grace on a church that had disgraced itself.

We might rather have expected Paul to have “read the riot act” to the problem-ridden Corinthian church.

Instead, Paul declared to them God’s underserved favor, grace.

He continued in the same vein in verse 5, where he affirmed the church in what little progress it had made.

He declared God’s grace to these struggling Christians, scarcely five years out of raw paganism.

The church is the community of grace.

Because God has given grace freely to us, we ought also to give it freely to others.

For all of our talk about “salvation by grace,” sometimes Christians show surprisingly little of it toward one another.

Grace is the theme of the entire Christian life, but Paul pronounced God’s grace to them.

We need to show grace to our fellow Christians like that.

A fault-finding, petty attitude is foreign to the Spirit of Christ and should be foreign to his church.

God has given the church many gifts.

These are to be used for a purpose.

Through this holy, expectant community of grace marching forward under the lordship of Christ,
God calls us to mission.