

Study 2: 1st Corinthians Chapter 1

Introduction

The Corinthian letter begins by Paul laying out the things that he has heard. He is quite specific where the information has come from – Chloe’s household. But before he does that, he takes the usual form of greeting. He re-iterates his credentials as an apostle, and then gives what is essentially a standard form of greeting.

But he soon gets right into the nitty gritty of the problems in the church – the factions that are dividing the brethren and underlying a lot of the other problems.

Body of the Study

What are the key introductory thoughts that Paul uses?

What is the first issue Paul addresses?

What effect should the cross have?

What is the cause of the problem?

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *How does Corinthians chapter 1 compare to what is happening in our society?*
- *In what ways does God use the foolish and weak to shame the wise and strong?*
- *How does this compare to the typical image of success and power?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapter 2 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 2: Chapter 1

Introduction

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Body of the Study

What are the key introductory thoughts that Paul uses?

Paul begins with his usual style of “signing his letter” at the beginning (and providing a short self written greeting at the end), and introducing his authority and characteristics. He asserts that he, Paul, is an apostle, and has been called to be one by Christ Jesus. Later in the letter he will spend some time on this (1:9:1→), and making reference in the introduction is his usual style.

The letter is specifically addressed to *the church of God in Corinth, to those who have been sanctified and called to be holy* (1:1:2). Despite having been set apart (which is what holy and sanctified means), they had not acted in this way. Paul is about to chastise them for their actions. Even though they *called on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ* (1:1:2) they were not living the way that they ought. *His grace was given to them* (1:1:4), and Paul extended it further in his final greeting (1:16:23). They had *been enriched* (1:1:4) and *had knowledge* (both by teaching and from the miraculous gifts), but despite those gifts, they were not using them as they should. They were confused as to the second coming of the Lord, even though *they eagerly awaited it* (1:1:7) as Paul did (1:16:22). Jesus would *keep them strong and blameless to the end* (1:1:8) but to do this, they needed *to be on their guard, stand firm, be men of courage, and be strong* (1:16:13).

Importantly, they needed to *continue in the fellowship* (1:1:9), and *submit to those who demonstrate the true characteristics and labour in the word* (1:16:16).

With our background knowledge of Corinth, and the outline of the Corinthian letter, we can see how Paul is already pointing to the things that are important to deal with in the letter.

Sosthenes is mentioned in Acts 18:17, as being the ruler of the synagogue in Corinth. He presented a poor case to Gallio, and consequently received a thorough beating from the Jews. It is quite likely (but not certain) that it is the same Sosthenes who is with Paul in Ephesus, and if so, then he must have become a christian after the beating. Adding weight to the supposition that he is same person is Paul’s mention of him in a letter to Corinth – but the name was common, so there was most likely more than one Sosthenes in Corinth.

What is the first issue Paul addresses?

Immediately after the introduction, Paul begins addressing the issue of division. But note that he does it with a plea “...*I plead with you brethren...*” (1:1:10).

Factions had developed in the church. Some were aligning themselves with Paul, some with Apollos, some with Peter, and some with Christ. This is in character with the city of Corinth:

The pride of Corinth showed itself largely in philosophical conceit, and the citizens who vaunted their superior intelligence were divided into sects, of whom Aristotle, Plato, Zeno, Epicurus, and later philosophers, were the heads. The church became inflated with this same intellectual vanity...¹

¹ McGarvey and Pendleton Commentary on Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians and Romans; Gospel Light Publishing Co, Delight Arkansas. P.52.

A look at the factions is quite revealing. Some of the factions are obvious. Some were simply Christians ...*after Christ*... and some were ...*after Paul*... It is clear why some would label themselves as such, for Paul had spent a considerable amount of time in the church, and had been there from the beginning. Apollos had been in Corinth after Paul (Acts 19:1), and had a great reputation for his eloquent, effective, and persuasive speech and his knowledge of the scriptures (ie the Old Testament) (Acts 18:24, 28). It is no wonder that he had some degree of following. But what about Peter? How did he get in on the act? There are several possibilities:

- The Judaisers had come to Corinth (which is probably true as they had been to most other places, although Paul doesn't deal strongly with them in the letter), and had said that they had come from the real apostles in Jerusalem – with Peter being the leader. Those who had aligned themselves to this group would hold up Peter as their leader.
- Some in the church in Corinth had been to Jerusalem, and been converted and baptised by Peter whilst there (or somewhere else where Peter had been).
- Some in the church had met Peter and heard him teach elsewhere and had taken a cult following to him.
- Peter had actually visited Corinth and converted some people there. Whilst there is no record in scripture of Peter having been in Corinth, Eusebius (approx 320 AD ???) quotes a letter written by Dionysius in Corinth "...Thus, likewise you, by means of this admonition, have mingled the flourishing seed that had been planted by Peter and Paul at Rome and Corinth. For both of these having planted us at Corinth, likewise instructed us..." (Eusebius, Book 1, chapter 25)²

So, there were factions in the church. But how serious was it? The answer to this question lies in Paul had first hand knowledge (well second hand actually, since it had come from members of Chloe's household – but he was fully acquainted with the situation). Paul thought that this was more than just a trivial issue. It was something that must not be allowed to continue.

The factionalism (had it been allowed to continue) would have been the start of denominationalism. The passage reads exactly as it would if we applied it to the religious bodies of our society. Note what Paul says about them:

^{1CO 1:10} I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. (1:1:10 NIV)

This is a perfect description of denominations, who are divided, have little or no agreement on most things, and are far from united in mind and thought. The division was characterised by the different names that they were wearing (just like denominations do today). Paul tells them that this is not the way that things should be:

^{1CO 1:13} Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised into the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I am thankful that I did not baptise any of you except Crispus and Gaius, (1:1:13-14 NIV)

The answer is quite obvious, and the only name that they should wear is the name of Christ. He was crucified for us, and we were baptised into His name. We should wear the name *christian*, and no more, and the church should be called after Him – *The church of (belonging to) Christ*.

Paul was pleased that he hadn't baptised any (or many) of them, lest they should attempt to wear his name, and call themselves "*Paulites*".

The implications of the factions within the local congregation had greatly hindered the work of the gospel. They were far from displaying a united front to the world. The issues of factionalism had (most likely) become more important than anything else, and was occupying their time and energy. Any contacts that the church may have had through some of the members would quickly

² Quoted from Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History; Baker Book House ISBN 0-8010-3306-3 p80

be “attacked” by the other factions as they tried to turn them away from the *wrong faction* to the *right one*. One doesn’t have to think very hard to work out what was going on. Paul says that the end of this kind of behaviour is that “...*the cross of Christ should be made of no effect...*” (1:1:17 NKJV).

Of note in this discussion is how Paul inextricably associates the work of Christ on the cross, and our baptism – through which Christ’s work is effected in us.

What effect should the cross have?

The Corinthians were professing themselves to be wise. It was directly in character with the *superior intelligence* that the worldly factions were extolling (refer to comments above from McGarvey). Each one of the factions thought that they were displaying their won version of wisdom. They regarded those who did not agree with their views and positions as *foolish*.

But Paul contrasts the real fools with those who have true wisdom. Those outside of Christ are the real fools. And yet they regard those who are christians in the same way (*fools*). “...*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...*” (1:1:18 NIV).

God had foreseen that this was how the world would see things, and He revealed it through prophecy (Is 29:14). Paul makes a comparison between worldly wisdom and God’s wisdom:

God’s Wisdom	Worldly Wisdom
Message of the cross is the Power of God	Message of the cross is foolishness
Worldly wisdom is foolish	Worldly wisdom is wise
Saves those who believe	Does not know God
Preach Christ crucified: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A stumbling block to the Jews • Foolishness to the Greeks 	Jews look for a sign Greeks seek after wisdom
Wiser than men Stronger than men	
Puts to shame the wise of the world	
Puts to shame the mighty things of the world	

It is hard for those in the christianized West, where the cross for almost nineteen centuries has been the primary symbol of faith, to appreciate how utterly mad the message of a God who got himself crucified by his enemies must have seemed to the first-century Greek or Roman. But it is precisely the depth of this scandal and folly that we *must* appreciate if we are to understand both why the Corinthians were moving away from it toward wisdom and why it was well over a century before the cross appears among Christians as a symbol of their faith.³

What is the cause of the problem?

So, what is going on in the church in Corinth that would cause Paul to make such a comparison? The most obvious answer is that many (all? – “...*I say that each of you says...*” (1:1:12)) of them were involved in the digression.

³ Fee, Gordon “The First Epistle to the Corinthians” New International Commentary on the New Testament; Eerdmans, Grand Rapids Mi; ISBN0-8028-2507-9 p.76

Throughout the epistle that thought [the Stoic paradox that the philosopher is everywhere sufficient for himself and always master of his circumstances – GO] recurs. The Corinthians “have knowledge.” To them all things are lawful. They are masters of their world. Especially, the thought gives point to the sarcastic contrast between them and the apostles...⁴

There is a common view that the church in the first century consisted mostly of people of “low class” [I want to point out that as christians we ought not to regard “class” as of any value. But the society from which people are drawn regard it, and to that extent I recognise it.] But, when we look at the church at Corinth, we can see that there are many people in the congregation who are of a higher class, and were (probably) well educated.

Of note, there were:

- Sosthenes – the ruler of the synagogue. He was obviously well educated to have been in such a position.
- Erastus – the treasurer of the city
- Chloe – she was *well to do*, as she had servants who were able to travel
- Aquila and Priscilla – had their own tentmaking business, and were able to travel
- Apollos – very well educated and *mighty in the scriptures*
- Gaius – was able to host Paul whilst he stayed there
- Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus – were able to travel, and to provide financial support to Paul.

So, with the education, and the philosophical background to the city, a collision course was set. Those who considered themselves to be educated jostled for position in the leadership of the congregation. They thought themselves to be wise. But Paul points out where true wisdom lies – it lies only in Christ, and not in the philosophies of men.

Paul reminds them: “...*It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."*...” (1.1:30-31 NIV)

⁴ Ramsay, William “Historical Commentary on First Corinthians” Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids Mi ISBN 0-8254-3637-0 p.23