

1 CORINTHIANS 1 -- INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEMS AT CORINTH



The first thing we should note about First Corinthians is how different it is from Romans. In Romans, Paul admits he had not yet visited them and so deals with issues there in a more general way (Rom. 1:9-13).

In contrast, in First Corinthians it is close and personal. According to Acts 18:1-18, Paul had founded that Church and been its pastor for almost two years. He did so during his Second Missionary Journey around A.D. 50-51. Why did he stay so long? It was not his idea but Christ's instructions. Luke records, "Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; *for I have many people in this city*'" (Acts 18:9-10). This is a vital truth -- God knows *where, when* and *whom* to call.

Regarding the importance of Corinth, Halley notes, "Corinth was situated on the Isthmus [means neck] of Greece, about 50 miles west of Athens. It was one of the largest, richest, and most important cities in the Roman Empire, with some 400,000 inhabitants, a number surpassed only by Rome, Alexandria and Antioch. Through its harbors flowed the commerce of the world. It was 'a renowned and voluptuous city, where the vices of the East and the West met'" (*Bible Handbook*, 1965, p. 593).

The Bible Knowledge Commentary adds: "From a human point of view Paul probably had reason to wonder if many saints would be found in Corinth. The ancient city had a reputation for vulgar materialism. In the earliest Greek literature, it was linked with wealth (Homer, *Iliad* 2. 569-70) and immorality. When Plato referred to a prostitute, he used the expression 'Corinthian girl' (*Republic*, 404d)...And Aristophanes coined the Gk. verb *korinthiazomai* [to corinthianize], referring to *fornicate* (*Fragment*, 354). According to Strabo (*Geography* 8. 6-20) much of the wealth and vice in Corinth centered around the temple of Aphrodite and its thousand temple prostitutes...[after its conquest by the Romans] Julius Caesar refounded the city as a Roman colony in 46 B.C. In 27 B.C., it became the governmental seat for Achaia, from which seat Gallio as proconsul would allow Paul's proclamation of the gospel (Acts 18:12). It was onto this new stage, which nonetheless preserved the vices of the old, that Paul stepped in A.D. 51."

The same commentary continues, "1 Corinthians is pointedly concerned with the local church. If anyone thinks his church has more than its share of riffraff and woe, he need only turn to this letter (and its companion epistle, 2 Cor.) to put his problems in perspective. First Corinthians provides a glimpse of life inside one first-century church, and far from saintly it was. Yet that is the reason Paul wrote this letter: to make sanctification something practical. The spirit of the world seemed more influential in the Corinthian church than the Spirit of God, despite the splendidly evident gifts given by the Spirit. Paul wanted to change that."

Halley gives a good background to this letter: "About three years after Paul left Corinth, and while he was in Ephesus about 200 miles to the east, a delegation of leaders of the Corinthian church was sent to Ephesus to consult Paul about some very serious problems and disorders that had arisen in the Church. It was then that Paul wrote this letter. He had written a previous letter, now lost (1 Cor. 5:9). The two cities were on a busy trade route, with ships plying between them constantly. The date of the epistle is around A.D. 57" (p. 593).

He begins this epistle: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:1-3).

This introduction is written in typical epistolary style of that Greco-Roman era. He first identifies the author, gives a brief description of himself, explains to whom the letter is written, gives a brief description of the recipient and then the greetings.

He first makes it clear that his authority comes from God, being named an apostle, a title just as the original twelve apostles had, who led the Church. Note the true name of the Church: *the Church of God*, which appears *twelve times* in Scripture. It is one of the proofs to identify the true Church since no human has the right *to change* the name God has given to it. Therefore, it is illegitimate to use other names such as—Catholic, Lutheran, Evangelical, Adventist, Jehovah's Witness, or Mormon Church. As Jesus said of the Church: "Holy Father, *keep*

through *Your name* those whom You have given Me, that they may be *one* as We are" (John 17:11). Paul next mentions these members have been called "to be holy," that is, to be *set apart*, so one day they will enter into His glorious, millennial kingdom.

He continues: "I thank my God always concerning *you* for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, that you were *enriched* in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, even as *the testimony of Christ* was confirmed in you, so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:4-8).

Paul constantly prayed for the state of the different congregations, *and so should we*. That's why it's so important to be aware of how God's Work is being done at the Home Office and the congregations around the world. Pray that God will care, bless, and protect all of them, and that His will be done here on earth.

Since the Church in Corinth was so cosmopolitan and multilingual, God had given them a very special but temporary gift: the ability to speak and hear in different languages. Sadly, they had gradually misused this gift and had become vain, so Paul had to correct them. Yet, despite their many problems and faults, he still encourages them to persevere in the faith because, "Christ...will also *confirm you to the end*, that you may be *blameless* in the [coming] day of our Lord Jesus Christ." So, if we faithfully do our part, God promises to do the rest.

Paul then focuses on the first major problem they had—a *divisive party spirit* by following their favorite leader to the exclusion of the rest. He says: "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you" (1 Cor. 1:10-11).

As often happens today, as in the past, church members tend to rally behind a physical leader to the exclusion of others. Back then, there were different leaders with different preaching and administrative styles. In Corinth, the members were

divided into four different groups. Paul points out the problem, "Now I say this, that each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Cor. 1:12-13).

Some thought *Paul* was the most important leader and his approach should be followed to the detriment of the rest. Others preferred *Apollos*, whom the Bible describes as "an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures" (Acts 18:24). It must have been fascinating to hear him preach. There was another group that considered *Peter*, or in Aramaic, Cephas, as the chief leader whom they should follow. Finally, there was a group who went to the other extreme and rejected all the Church leaders and claimed to only follow *Christ*. These interpreted the Bible in their own way and were a bit like the hermit monks who later appeared in history. They took their Bibles to a cave and only recognized Christ. Yet, it's easy to say that one follows only Christ since He is in heaven and does not deal directly with people, nor can He offend them. What is difficult is learning to follow Christ through the leaders God places in His Church, who are fallible and imperfect. Paul later gives the solution: "Follow my example, just as I follow the *example* of Christ." (1 Cor. 11:1). Only follow him *as* he follows Christ.

It is natural for members to side with some particular leader they like, but the problem arises when they become exclusivist, instead of inclusivist, looking down on others as not being as righteous or wise as they. They have a *party spirit*—by not *including* the rest of the Church in their fellowship.

Paul explains other leaders and he are all merely ministers serving God, and should neither be overregarded nor underregarded. In other words, ministers should be considered in the proper function. No one should follow a man above Christ, and every leader must be evaluated based on whether they truly follow Christ and His teachings. If that leader quits obeying God's laws as Christ taught, no matter what position of importance he holds, he must be rejected. As Peter said, "We must obey *God* rather than *men*" (Acts 5:29).

Sometimes if the minister isn't entirely to your liking, you must be patient and never forget that Christ is the head of the Church and not the temporary minister in charge. Christ is above all the

ministers and the One we should show the greatest respect and honor. He is the one who gave His life for the Church and “purchased [it] with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). That’s the point Paul is making. One is not baptized in the name of any man, but in the name of Christ. So, we should look beyond any problems in the Church as long as it is faithful to God’s laws and know Christ is still leading it from heaven and will correct the problem in due time.

Paul reminds them: “I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other” (1 Cor. 1:14-16).

He knew some might boast that they were baptized [or ordained] by a great apostle and would look down on someone baptized by the local minister. The point is that it doesn’t matter who the minister of the Church is who baptizes you, as long as he is faithful to God’s laws. Yet, more vital is what you do *after* that baptism in your life. As Paul said, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). Notice also, because of this tendency to boast about the status of the person who baptizes one, Jesus himself did not baptize anyone, but left it to His disciples (John 4:1-2).

Therefore, Paul’s primary function was to preach the gospel of the kingdom, and he left the actual process of baptizing to others. He says: “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest *the cross of Christ* should be made of no effect. 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. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.’ Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but *we preach Christ crucified*, to *the Jews a stumbling block* and to the Greeks foolishness, but *to those who are called*, both Jews and Greeks, *Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God*” (1 Cor. 1:17-24).

The message Paul preached focused on an extraordinary event that summed up what Christ had done, in the phrase, “the cross of Christ.” The central message of the entire Bible is what God has done for all of us through Jesus’ sacrifice so that He can bring us into His kingdom and give us eternal life. It centers on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This message is not complicated, nor based on sophisticated philosophy, but on concrete facts. As Luke states: “The former account I made...of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:1-3).

Paul had revealed this message to the Corinthians. Most of the Jews in Corinth had rejected him, for it is very difficult for them to conceive that God would come to earth in the flesh and die for our sins. They had been wrongly taught by the rabbis that the Messiah would come as a great conqueror who would defeat Israel’s enemies and immediately establish the kingdom of God. Although the Messiah’s sufferings, death, and resurrection are clearly set forth in Isaiah 53 and elsewhere, they were too blinded by the false teachings of the Jewish leaders to grasp it, and thus had “a veil” when they read their Bibles (2 Cor. 3:14-16). Barclay explains: “It seemed bizarre to the Jews that the one who had ended His life hanging on a cross was the Messiah. They pointed out the Law clearly stated: ‘He who is hanged is accursed of God’ (Deut. 21:23; see answer in Gal. 3:13-14).

For the majority of the Jews, the fact of the crucifixion, or “the cross of Christ,” far from proving that Jesus was the Son of God, was the “stumbling block” that refuted it. It may seem incredible, but although they could read Isaiah 53, most Jews didn’t believe a suffering Messiah would first come.

Thus, for most Jews, the cross was and remains today an insurmountable obstacle to believing in Jesus. To the Greeks, it was “foolishness” or absurd to consider that God would come to the earth and die for the sins of mankind. Besides, they didn’t have a concept of what spiritual sin meant since they didn’t have an understanding of God’s law.