

I. The Corinthian Coffeehouse

September 4/6, 2012

Acts 18ff.; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3

Aim: To introduce Paul's first epistle to the Corinthian church.

Since we will be serving coffee and dessert during our study of 1 Corinthians, our Bible Study this year is called 'the Corinthian Coffeehouse.'

A. Establishing the Corinthian Church (Acts 18)

1. The City of Corinth

Greece is divided geographically into two parts. The southern part, the Peloponnesus, is attached to the northern by a very narrow, four-mile-wide isthmus. On the western side are the Gulf of Corinth and the port city of Lechaem. On the eastern side are the Saronic Gulf and the port city of Cenchreae. In the middle of the isthmus, to the south, is Corinth, situated on a commanding plateau. In ancient times all north and south overland traffic, including that to and from Athens, had to pass through Corinth, making the city a wide-open boomtown vibrant with people.

Corinth's geographical position on the narrow land bridge (4 miles across) between the Greek peninsula and the Peloponnesus was crossed by many people. It was a strategic center of commerce by land and by sea. Sea travelers and mercantile goods passed both ways across the Corinthian isthmus; the seas to the south of the Peloponnesus were dangerous to shipping. Rather than attempt the risky voyage around the southern land mass, merchants and the military often transported their goods, men, and hardware overland. Most captains even chose to carry their ships overland on skids or rollers across the narrow isthmus, directly past Corinth. This procedure was quicker, more economical, and much safer than sailing 250 miles around the peninsula. In fact, the isthmus came to be known as *dialcos*, which means 'the place of dragging across.' In peacetime, the city of Corinth controlled this lucrative traffic. Today a canal—envisioned by Perisander in the 6th century BC, begun by the Roman emperor Nero in the first century AD, but not completed until the end of nineteenth century—connects the two gulfs across the isthmus, greatly facilitating maritime travel.

In classical times Corinth had been a rival of Greece. The Roman invasion of Greece, however, reduced the city to rubble in 146 BC. About a century later Julius Caesar re-established the city, but as a Roman colony. Corinth was the capital of the province of Achaia and was ruled by its own Roman proconsul. The city became a melting pot for Greeks, Syrians, Jews, and resettled Roman army veterans, providing a rich mix of ethnicity and religion. As an accessible travel center, it would draw all the itinerant philosophers and rhetoricians on the circuit.

Corinth was also successful as an entertainment center. The two great athletic festivals of that day were the Olympian and the Isthmian games. Every two years the Isthmian games brought competitors and multitudes of spectators to Corinth. Furthermore, Corinth was noted for its manufacture of bronzes according to a secret formula. The city was a wealthy cosmopolitan seaport, with a reputation for being at the cutting edge of Mediterranean life and culture.

Thriving commerce often translates into thriving debauchery, but Corinth took debauchery and licentiousness to new heights – or depths! The other pagan cities of the day acknowledged Corinth's moral corruption by coining the word *corinthiazesthai* – to live like a Corinthian. This

1 Corinthians – Lesson 1

word came to represent gross immorality and drunken debauchery; the name of the city became synonymous with moral depravity.

Like most Greek cities, Corinth had an acropolis (literally, ‘high city’), called Acrocorinth, which was used as a place of defense and for pagan worship. From its top on a clear day Athens can be seen, some 45 miles away. Situated on a 2,000-foot high granite mound, Acrocorinth was large enough to hold all the population of Corinth and of its surrounding farmlands in time of siege. It also held a famous temple to Aphrodite, goddess of love. The temple normally housed some one thousand priestesses, ritual prostitutes, who each night would come down into Corinth and ply their trade among the many foreign travelers and the local men.

Corinth appears to have been an exceptionally ‘religious’ city. Religion was plentiful and the tide of iniquity flowed on unabated. In fact, the religions of Corinth were part of the problem. A temple to the goddess of love and fertility, Aphrodite, was there. A thousand priestesses plied the trade of prostitution as part of the religious rites. Long-haired male prostitutes were also a common sight. There were many temples for the gods, shrines for the Roman imperial family, and mystery cults. All this presented a problem for the members of the church in Corinth, many of whom remained enmeshed in ‘temple culture.’

Religion and politics were inextricably linked. All the cults of the gods and the mysteries expressed solidarity with local civic life and reverence towards the Roman emperors upon whom all provincial life depended. Only the Jews were excused from participating in the sacrifices. At the beginning the Christians may also have enjoyed this liberty since officially they were viewed as part of Judaism.

By the time of Paul’s visit, about a hundred years after its re-foundation, Corinth was a bustling port city, a dazzling Roman city of cosmopolitan character and brash manner. Its vigorous cultic life, however, was an ever present threat to those Gentiles who as Christians must turn their backs on the gods, the temples, and their priests. Archaeological excavations have revealed many evidences of a city lifestyle devoted to entertainment and self-indulgence. As citizens of the 21st century, we would have found much that was instantly familiar had we been with Paul in Corinth.

2. The Church of Corinth (Acts 18)

Paul arrived in Corinth in the autumn of 50 AD and his initial ministry occupied about a year and a half. On his arrival from Athens he stayed with Aquila and Priscilla, who were fellow-Jews, fellow-tentmakers, and fellow-believers. During this period Paul taught the gospel to Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue (Acts 18:1-4). When he was rejoined from Macedonia by Silas and Timothy, Paul intensified his ministry in Corinth which now extended to the Gentile population (Acts 18:5-8).

Those whom Paul addresses in the letter would therefore have been a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, from both monotheistic and pagan backgrounds, and from the little evidence we have it is likely that they would have represented a wide social range.

Acts 18:12 tells us that Gallio occupied the office of Roman proconsul during Paul’s first visit to Corinth. An independent inscription from Delphi regarding proconsul Gallio enables historians to date the church-planting visit to 51-52 AD. After a ministry of eighteen months, Paul left Corinth in the spring of 52 AD with Priscilla and Aquila and went to Ephesus. Leaving his friends there, he returned to Palestine (Acts 18:12-22).

1 Corinthians – Lesson 1

B. Interacting with the Corinthian Church

1. Non-Pauline Interactions

Silas and Timothy remained in Corinth when Paul left in 52 AD, though it is not clear how long they remained. We lose track of Silas for the next dozen or so years until he appears in Rome as Peter's amanuensis (1 Pe. 5:12). Sometime after Paul came to Ephesus, Timothy rejoined him from Corinth (1 Cor. 16:10; Acts 19:22).

A sequence of Christian leaders visited Corinth during Paul's stay in Ephesus. First came Apollos, the Jew from Alexandria. Apollos had heard about the preaching of John the Baptist. Apollos did not grasp that Christ was the fulfillment of John's preaching and teaching until he came to the synagogue in Ephesus where Priscilla and Aquila 'showed him the way of God more accurately' (Acts 18:26). He was encouraged to journey to Achaia and became the second pastor of the infant Corinthian church. Paul arrived in Ephesus shortly after Apollos left. Apollos created a great impression when he came to Corinth, both for his eloquence and the power of his spiritual fervor (Acts 18:24-25, 28). In 1 Corinthians Paul addresses the new fascinations of the Corinthians in rhetoric, wisdom, and 'spiritual' ministry. It is possible that Apollos' ministry had unintentionally inflamed these expressions of ministry in Corinth. Paul must address the issues of wisdom and rhetoric in chapters 1-4 and 'spiritual' ministry in chapters 12-14.

Sometime later Corinth was favored by a visit from Peter (Cephas) and his wife (9:5). From 33-49 AD Peter had been the apostle to the land of Israel, proclaiming the gospel in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. After the Jerusalem Council in 49 AD Peter began to travel outside the land of Israel. He probably revisited the churches in Palestine and most likely came once more to Antioch. It is possible that he traveled through Asia Minor before coming to the Corinth sometime after 52 AD. It is possible that Peter's visit, like Apollos', also unsettled the Corinthians in regard to Paul, though in different ways. Peter may have created the impression that since Paul had not been a disciple of the historical Jesus he was not fully an apostle. This would explain why Paul needed to insist on his genuine apostleship (9:1-3; 15:8-11).

Barnabas, Paul's colleague in Antioch and partner on his First Missionary Journey, also may have visited Corinth at some point (cp. 9:6). The coming of Apollos, Peter, and Barnabas showed the Corinthians that Paul was by no means the only preacher or Christian leader.

It also appears that a local leader or leaders had arisen who were taking the church in a rather different direction from the founding apostle (3:10, 19; 4:18-19). These have created their own loyal followings, against one another and against Paul (4:6). These new leaders are teaching a wisdom-based message, not Christ crucified and risen. Paul faces these troublemakers with his admonitions in the letter, but also by urging the Corinthians to recognize responsible local people like Stephanas (16:15-18) and welcoming warmly Timothy when he comes (16:10-11).

2. Pauline Interactions

The following is my [DSB] proposed sequence of events outlining Paul's complex interactions with the Corinthian church from 50-56 AD.

a) Events Leading to the Writing of First Corinthians

- Paul plants the church of Corinth during his Second Missionary Journey, staying in Corinth eighteen months from about Sep-50 to Mar-52 AD (Acts 18:1-18).

1 Corinthians – Lesson 1

- Paul departs Corinth via Cenchreae, leaves Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus, and returns to Antioch via Jerusalem, ending the Second Missionary Journey around May-52 AD (Acts 18:18-22).
- After a short stay in Antioch, Paul begins the Third Missionary Journey (Aug-52 AD), returning overland through Galatia to Ephesus as promised, arriving in the spring of 53 AD (Acts 18:23; 19:1).
- In Ephesus, Paul learns from Aquila and Priscilla about Apollos, who had gone on to minister in Corinth (Acts 18:24-28). Paul apparently approves (later) of Apollos and his ministry (1 Cor. 3:5-6; 16:12).
- While Paul is in Ephesus, apparently Peter visits Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12; cp. 9:5), and also possibly Barnabas (cp. 9:6).
- During Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus, he writes the 'lost' or 'previous' letter (1 Cor. 5:9), which was also apparently corrective in nature.
- By the spring of 56 AD, news regarding the Corinthian church reaches Paul from a variety of sources:
 - Members of Chloe's household report that divisions exist in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11).
 - Apollos has returned to Ephesus at some point, perhaps embarrassed at being set up as a rival to Paul (1 Cor. 1:12), and gets to know Paul (1 Cor. 16:12).
 - A delegation from Corinth – composed of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus – comes to Paul in Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:17-18), likely carrying a letter with specific questions (1 Cor. 7:1). Perhaps some of the questions were prompted by the 'lost' letter.
- Given all these sources of information, and in response to the questions in the letter, Paul writes 1 Corinthians from Ephesus in early 56 AD. The epistle is likely carried directly back to Corinth by the delegation of Stephanas.
- Paul plans to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost 56 AD; after Pentecost Paul plans to travel via Macedonia to Corinth where he hopes to spend the winter (1 Cor. 16:5-9); after that he intended to carry the Collection to Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1-4) and then go on to Rome and Spain (Acts 19:21; cp. Rom. 15:22-28).
- Meanwhile, Paul sends Timothy and Erastus from Ephesus into Macedonia (Acts 19:22), apparently intending that Timothy, at least, should work his way down to Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10-11).

b) Events Leading to the Writing of Second Corinthians

- Timothy apparently arrives in Corinth (after the delivery of First Corinthians?), but he is unable to enforce Paul's directions. Paul receives news (probably from Timothy upon his return to Ephesus) that the situation in Corinth has worsened rather than improved. Paul decides that an immediate, direct confrontation with the church is necessary. Therefore, Paul changes his travel plans, deciding to go directly to Corinth in the summer of 56 AD and expecting to visit Macedonia afterward (reversing his original plan), and then returning once again to Corinth (2 Cor. 1:15-16).
- This second visit of Paul to Corinth is a painful experience and a 'sorrowful visit' (2 Cor. 2:1). Opposition to Paul apparently comes to a head and one member in particular defies his authority (2 Cor. 2:5; 7:12). Unsuccessful in reconciling the church, Paul is deeply humiliated and leaves Corinth, scrapping his plan to travel to Macedonia, and returns directly to Ephesus (2 Cor. 1:17, 23).

1 Corinthians – Lesson 1

- Back in Ephesus, Paul writes the ‘severe’ or ‘sorrowful’ letter (2 Cor. 2:3-4, 9; 7:8-9). This letter is carried to Corinth by the hand of Titus (2 Cor. 7:5-7), who is a stronger personality than Timothy.
- Paul is assailed by severe depression and extreme external danger in Ephesus (2 Cor. 1:8-11), perhaps a reference to the Ephesian riot (Acts 19:23ff).
- Paul leaves Ephesus (Acts 20:1) and travels to Troas, hoping to find Titus there, but he does not (2 Cor. 2:12-13).
- Paul hurries on to Macedonia (Philippi) where he finds Titus (2 Cor. 2:13; 7:5-6).
- Titus reports that the severe letter has been effective. Most of the Corinthians have repented and were eager for Paul’s return. Further, they had disciplined the one who had wronged Paul, and he, too, had repented. Paul was overjoyed at the news (2 Cor. 7:6-16).
- With a third visit to Corinth now on his mind (2 Cor. 12:14; 13:1), Paul writes 2 Corinthians in autumn 56 AD from Macedonia (2 Cor. 2:13; 7:5-6; 8:1; 9:2-4).
- Paul sends Titus back to Corinth with two others to deliver the epistle and assist with the Collection (2 Cor. 8:16-9:5).
- Paul visits Corinth for the third time and spends three months there during the winter of 56-57 AD (Acts 20:2-3). During his stay in Corinth, he writes the epistle to the Romans (cp. Rom. 15:25-28), delivered by Phoebe of Cenchræe (Rom. 16:1), the port city of Corinth.

F. F. Bruce suggests that the epistle of 2 Corinthians was written in two parts. Chapters 1-9 were written first and delivered to Corinth by Titus in the autumn of 56 AD. In this letter, Paul explained that he sent Titus first instead of coming himself to avoid causing pain. Paul wears his heart on his sleeve and enlarges on the hardships and splendors of apostolic service. Paul tells them he will soon return to Corinth for the Collection; meanwhile, he is sending Titus back with two friends to help.

According to Bruce’s theory, the second visit of Titus to Corinth did not go as well as his first. Some members in Corinth may have felt pressure to give generously like the Macedonians. Meanwhile certain visitors (‘superlative apostles’) in Corinth had begun to undermine Paul’s prestige by insisting upon the authority of Jerusalem. Therefore, Paul follows up with another letter, sent a little bit later and composed of chapters 10-13 of Second Corinthians. This theory attempts to explain why there is an apparent change of tone and emphasis between chapters 1-9 and 10-13 of Second Corinthians.

C. Characterizing the Corinthian Church

There are many evidences in the epistle of the cultural ‘squeeze’ which had the potential to suffocate the young church. From their pagan background, many of the new converts would still have been attached to the phenomena of their old religion, including ecstatic speech and cult-prostitution. Pagan temples were at the heart of Corinthian social life.

What was the problem? Contamination and confusion. The Corinthian church was contaminated by society’s sins and confused by its thinking. Today’s church finds herself in a frighteningly secular world, one in which paganism is aggressive and militant. Opportunities are great, but alas, the church often seems to be as contaminated and confused as the church of Corinth. Paul’s medicine for Corinth will do us good. He bathes the contamination and the confusion of the church in the glory of Christ crucified.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 1

1. Authority

The most basic problem was the opposition to Paul's authority as an apostle. In his absence various unnamed persons have arisen to seize control of the church. These are rejecting the authority of Paul as an apostle of Christ to direct their thinking and behavior. Paul responds to this challenge throughout the letter (cp. 1:1; 2:10-16; 3:10; 4:8-16; 9:1-3; 14:36-38; 15:8-11).

2. Division

The Corinthians are true believers, set apart and called to be holy, united with all other Christians. They are also a gifted congregation, enriched by God's grace in every area of their corporate life and ministry and eagerly awaiting Christ's return. But they are divided. Factionalism has become a serious problem in the life of the Corinthian church.

As the first part of the letter unfolds, it becomes clear there are four areas of controversy, which are encapsulated by particular 'buzz' words. The first is *knowledge*, which the Corinthians wanted to elevate to the primary position, but which Paul wants to reduce in its importance compared with love (1:5; 8:1, 7, 10-11; 12:8; 13:2, 8; 14:6). The second is *wisdom* around which most of the first two chapters rotate. Paul's argument is that their concept of wisdom is culturally conditioned and driven by the values of this world, whereas God's wisdom is located in the 'foolishness' of the cross (1:17, 19-24, 30; 2:1, 4-7, 13; 3:19; 12:8). *Power* is the next issue under discussion, as the Corinthian emphasis is so much on external excitement in the demonstration of the supernatural. Here the apostle's correction is to show that the greatest evidence of divine power is in the saving grace of God, generated by Christ's death (1:18-24; 2:4-5; 4:19-20; 5:4; 6:14; 12:10, 28-29; 14:11; 15:24, 43, 56). Lastly, Paul focuses on the vexed question of what it means to be *spiritual*, with his strong shift from impressive external displays of gifts or ecstasy, to the humble service of love which is the heart-beat of the gospel (2:13-15; 3:1; 9:11; 10:3-4; 12:1; 14:1, 37; 15:44, 46).

For these and other reasons (e.g., eschatology, see below), quarrels were developing in the church, as they divided over different human leaders (1:10-12; 3:3-9; 4:1-2), to whom Paul was definitely considered inferior by some. They were in danger of producing a boastful, 'puffed up' church, which was in danger of losing the gospel of Christ crucified altogether (1:29-31; 3:21; 4:6-7, 18-19; 8:1).

3. Eschatology

In the past three years a rather different eschatology from that which Paul taught had come to the surface in Corinth. We know Paul's eschatological perspectives when present in Corinth since these may be seen in First and Second Thessalonians, which were written from Corinth. But the Corinthians appear to have switched their focus from the future to the present. For the Corinthians 'wisdom' had come to be associated with power and the appearance of things. Paul must remind them that the believers' hope is directed to the future, to glorious things which eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor the human heart imagined (2:6-9). Paul must remind them that 'Christ crucified' is the 'wisdom and power of God' that overturns all human ideas of wisdom and power and which (1:7-2:5), when apprehended, opens the way to God's coming glorious kingdom.

There seemed to be claims that they were already living above the normal, material experience of Christians in this present world and had somehow already entered into the blessings of the eternal kingdom, making the future resurrection of the body irrelevant and redundant. This over-

1 Corinthians – Lesson 1

realized eschatology which tried to bring all the blessings of the ‘not yet’ into the ‘now’ was attractive and exciting at first, but would ultimately lead to disillusionment and decline as its expectations could never be fulfilled in this world.

Related to this, it seems, are the doubts of ‘some’ in regard to the future resurrection of the body (15:12). Possibly these doubts about future resurrection stemmed from a combination of Greek skepticism about the resurrection of the body and the Corinthians’ new sense that in their new experience of the Spirit God’s purposes were for now, not later (over-realized eschatology – cp. 4:8; 14:36). If there is no resurrection of the body there will be no judgment of God in the end. If there is no judgment of God then there is no reason not to engage in bad behavior. The members of the church could, therefore, adopt an easy-going attitude to adultery and visiting prostitutes (5:1-2; 6:9-20). Furthermore, continued involvement in the temples and partaking of idol-sacrificed meat is not a problem (chapters 8-10) – if there is no judgment.

4. Worldliness

Arising from their flawed eschatology is their worldliness and individualism. Paul confronts them with these twin evils at many points. They are seen in the arrogance of upstart leaders and in the parading of ‘gifts’ of wisdom, knowledge, and eloquence (1:5; 8:1-3, 10; 10:12). Their enhanced sense of knowledge and wisdom blinded them to the effects their liberty (in attending temples) was having on weaker Christians. Yet they appeared not to care about the impact of their behavior on others. The preoccupation with ‘spiritual gifts’ that enhance the ego of the one who speaks demonstrates well the individualism of the Corinthians. Paul must teach them that the true evidence of the Spirit is conversion and that ‘gifts’ are given for the upbuilding of the ‘body’ of believers; if they are not used in ‘love’ for them they are quite valueless.

Their most serious problem was in not detaching themselves from the worldly ways of the society around them. They could not get ‘decorinthianized.’ In his previous lost letter, Paul specifically had warned them ‘not to associate with immoral people’ (5:9). Some of the Christians thought he meant for them not to associate with unbelievers who were immoral. But the sexually corrupt, the covetous, swindling, and idolatrous people to whom Paul referred to were fellow church members who refused to give up, or had fallen back into, the debauched lifestyle of Corinth (5:9-11).

Like many Christians today, the Corinthian believers had great difficulty in not mimicking the unbelieving and corrupt society around them. They wanted to be in God’s kingdom while keeping one foot in the kingdom of this world. They wanted to have the blessings of the new life but hang on to the pleasures of the old.

5. Scandal

There were quite a number of aspects of the life of the Corinthians that would have provoked negative comment locally. One example is the adultery of a man with his stepmother, a sin not found even among pagans (5:1). A second is the practice of church members taking one another to the public courts. This told the wider community that these Christians were a disorderly lot! (6:1-8). A third example is the women prophets who are casting off the ‘sign’ of their submission in marriage (11:13-14). A fourth is the factions apparent at the Lord’s Supper (11:17-22), especially at the time of food shortage. A fifth is the chaos in the church meetings, with the babbling of tongues, prophets talking over the top of one another, and wives calling out questions across the meeting (14:26-40). Such behavior would have attracted serious criticism in

1 Corinthians – Lesson 1

a city like Corinth, where good order in cult groups was important. Surviving rules governing mystery cults reveal that disorder was unacceptable.

Paul accuses the Corinthians of creating ‘schisms’ (*schismata* – 1:10; 11:18; 12:25), chattering (14:26-40), and ‘indicting and accusing’! Paul was sensitive to the church developing a bad reputation. Many of Paul’s concerns found in First Corinthians arise from his awareness that the behavior of the Corinthians may have fallen below the standards that applied to other groups at that time. This is relevant. It is a scandal when standards of behavior in the church fall below those of the community.

D. Writing to the Corinthian Church

Hints scattered throughout the letter help us to understand how the letter came to be written. Paul received news from Corinth and the problems there from a variety of sources. The family or associates of Chloe, likely a member of the church, informed him about serious divisions within the fellowship (1:11). He received a delegation from the church in the persons of Stephanas, one of the few at Corinth whom Paul had baptized personally (1:16), Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16:17), and these men may have conveyed a letter from the church (7:1). In addition, Apollos had returned from Corinth and was with Paul in Corinth (16:12), and he no doubt also could corroborate the issues raised by the other sources. They told of factions, adultery, wives casting off their hair covering while prophesying, selfish actions at the Lord’s Supper, and doubts about the future resurrection.

Paul refers to an earlier letter (5:9), one which we do not have. Evidently, this letter was a stinging rebuke to the church for their careless living. It did not succeed in putting an end to their problems, but it did prompt a return letter from the church, in which they posed several questions. For the most part, however, these questions are couched in argumentative tones. Surely it is right for women to abstain from sexual relations (7:1)? Has a father really done wrong in betrothing his older-than-usual daughter for marriage (7:25)? Surely it is acceptable to dine in an idol-house (8:1)? Surely ‘tongue-speaking’ is the true sign of the Spirit (12:1)? How long must we put money aside for this collection (16:1)? Surely Apollos will come back to us soon (16:12)? 1 Corinthians is Paul’s response to their letter.

Paul could have dealt with the reports, then answered the questions. He might have done this in a few pages. Rather, he analyzes these reports and questions and finds five broad topics. These he presents as a sequence of pastoral sermons for the upbuilding of the church in Corinth and elsewhere. The topics are: 1) true wisdom and false (chapters 1-4); 2) holiness in sexuality (chapters 5-7); 3) idolatry and temple worship (chapters 8-10); 4) the gathered church (chapters 11-14); and 5) the abolition of death. In chapter 16 Paul outlines his future plans and finishes with strong words of encouragement. Paul wanted to bring their contamination and confusion into the light of the gospel, so it would be clear that Christianity works, even in a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, pagan society like Corinth. This church was both a marvel and a mess, and Paul’s concern was to help them clean up the mess so only the marvel would be left for the godless city of Corinth to see.

Not only does this letter challenge our contemporary eccentricities and inconsistencies, but it also teaches us a better way, ‘a still more excellent way’ of love and its powerful, penetrating message that delineates the nature of a true spirituality which can emanate only from the gospel of the crucified Savior.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 1

E. Greeting the Corinthian Church (1 Cor. 1:1-3)

In his opening greeting to the Corinthians Paul introduces the theme which will dominate the remainder of the letter, that is, God has called the Corinthians to be His ‘holy ones.’ What Paul says in the first three verses of this letter really drives right to the heart of the contamination and confusion of the church. These verses contain in germinal form everything the Corinthians needed to get themselves sorted out.

In Paul’s introduction to this letter (1:1-9), he has a desire to emphasize the centrality of Christ in the scheme of salvation, His name and title being mentioned nine times in as many verses. Because of an overemphasis upon manifestations of the Spirit, particularly tongues (12:30-31), Paul sets the tone for the whole letter; the church needs to give more consideration to the Lord, as expounded by the apostle, than they are wont to do.

1. Author (1:1)

¹*Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes...*

Paul’s description of himself is pretty heavy. The sender is an official delegate of the Messiah, Jesus, and – note this carefully – he holds this office ‘by the will of God.’

First, Paul reminds them of his authority as an apostle. An ‘apostle’ (*apostolos*) is one who is sent with all the authority of the one who commissions his agent. In the New Testament the word usually applies to those of the immediate followers of Christ who were chosen and sent by Him, whose teaching was inspired and infallible, and who became the founders of the church. The emphasis is the anointed one, who is the Savior precisely because he is the Lord. Moreover, ‘the will of God’ is the active initiator of this call, so that neither change nor Paul’s own choosing had any part to play in his mission. It was God’s will that he came to Corinth, it was His will that the members of the church responded with faith to God’s grace in the gospel, and it was in that same will that this letter was now being written to them.

Paul knew he could not be of any help to the Corinthians until they recognized his authority and submitted to it. Somehow they had got the notion that they could ‘freelance’ in the Christian life, they could make it up as they went along. By reminding them of his apostleship, Paul was pulling them back from this disastrous mentality. The apostle was the recipient and bearer of God’s revelation to the churches. We might say the apostles were to the early church what the New Testament is to us. Since God had invested such authority in them it was not optional to believe them.

Paul did not mention his apostleship as an individual but to gain respect as a teacher of God’s Word. He was not an apostle by his own appointment, or even by the church’s appointment, but by God’s appointment. At the outset he wanted to establish that what he had to say was said with God’s authority. Since his message was so corrective, this was of great necessity.

By contrast, Sosthenes, the co-sender, is merely Paul’s ‘brother,’ a fellow-Christian who was with him at the time of writing. Sosthenes may have been Paul’s amanuensis, or secretary, at the time this letter was written. Sosthenes knew the Corinthian situation well. Sosthenes was the former ruler of the synagogue of Corinth who was beaten up in the presence of Gallio the proconsul (Acts 18:17) and who must have been converted in the meantime and become a co-worker of Paul’s in Ephesus. Having likely been converted under Paul’s preaching and having worked with the apostle for perhaps a year or more in Corinth, Sosthenes was known and

1 Corinthians – Lesson 1

respected by the Corinthian believers. Mentioned only here and in Acts 18:17, it may be that the apostle introduces him because he wants the Corinthians to understand, before he dives into a weighty epistle, that what he writes comes with the approval of a mutual friend who has the care of the church on his heart.

2. Recipients (1:2)

a) *The Local Church*

²*To the church of God that is in Corinth...*

Paul goes on to remind them of their high calling. His letter is addressed to ‘the church of God’ or more literally, ‘God’s assembly,’ which was in Corinth. The order of calling it the ‘church of God in Corinth’ rather than the ‘church of Corinth in God’ (cp. 1 Th. 1:1) may be an artful hint that the Corinthian church belongs to God and to no one else, and certainly not to the local culture.

The word ‘church’ (*ekklēsia*) was originally used for any secular assembly but Christians took the term and made it distinctively theirs. They used it to designate those called out of the world by God for fellowship with Him. It was also the Greek word in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament used to point to Israel as God’s assembled people. Here the emphasis is on the ‘gathered people of God.’ The church is a living ‘body’ as Paul will say later (12:12-27).

There are three distinctive Paul uses which are always characteristic of the church of God, wherever it is found and at whatever time in history.

b) *The Sanctified Church*

...to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints...

First, Christians are ‘sanctified (*hagiasmenois*) in Christ Jesus.’ They have been set apart as His own particular possession. He had cleansed them from their sins and set them apart for His own use. They do not belong to anyone else but Christ, so they must not ally themselves to any merely human leader (1:12).

Second, Christians are therefore ‘called to be saints (*hagioi*),’ that is ‘holy ones,’ or more literally ‘set-apart ones.’ Sainthood isn’t something that applies only to a handful of super-Christians. All Christians are saints because they all share the common experience of being sanctified by God. The clear implication is that holiness of life must be cultivated in daily discipleship. We must be what we are. If we are ‘in Christ Jesus,’ then we must grow more like Him in every aspect of our living. This will have profound implications for ethical behavior, as Paul demonstrates later in this letter.

As Christians we should live holy lives, but holy living does not make us holy. We are holy because the Sanctifier has already sanctified us in response to our trust in Him. Christ’s work, not our own, makes us holy. We are ‘saints by calling.’ That refers to the efficacious call of God to salvation.

One of Paul’s methods as a letter writer is to signal in his opening words an important theme or themes which will be developed throughout the letter. In this letter it is the theme of ‘holiness’ which is critical because of the *unholiness* of some of the Corinthian believers, both in their lovelessness and crass individualism within the congregation and their ongoing compromise with pagan idolatry and sexual practices in the wider community of pagan Corinth.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 1

It has been a universal human failing throughout history to think of special places ('temples'), special people ('priests'), and special times ('holy days') as sacred. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is the gathered *people* who are 'sanctified in Christ Jesus...called to be saints.' It is they who are set apart in God's sight as His people. This 'holiness' is not merely outward reverence, however, but practical obedience to God's revealed will. In short, God through His apostle, is calling us to a life of holiness. That, in a nutshell, is the message of Paul to the Corinthians and to us.

In using these powerful phrases, the apostle was already issuing a strong encouragement to the Corinthians to deal decisively with the sins in their midst. God's grace had made them His holy ones. Those who have such a high calling could not take sin lightly. Their calling demanded the highest moral character, and Paul's introductory words urge them to live up to that calling.

c) The Universal Church

...together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

Third, Christians are united to one another by a common faith in Jesus as Lord. Paul reminds them of the larger family of saints to which they belong. One of Paul's emphases in the letter is that the congregation at Corinth belongs to the universal church and is not at liberty therefore to choose its own path. They are 'together with all those...in every place.' The Corinthians were part and parcel of a larger body of believers; they were not mere autonomous islands who could live without regard to the other members of the body of Christ. God has no lone-rangers. What binds believers together is no less than a common faith. Paul's words imply that the Corinthians had failed to see that all the followers of Christ had a stake in how they measured up to their Christian calling. Being part of a larger reality than merely our own congregation is something we also need to be reminded of. How our congregation behaves has implications for the wider church.

Paul also refers to other centers of Christian fellowship in the province of Achaia (cp. 2 Cor. 1:1). In passing, this implies that this letter will be copied for other churches, explaining how in time the letters of Paul were made available throughout all his churches (cp. Col. 4:16). Paul established churches in major cities like Corinth and Ephesus, with one of his aims being for local evangelists to establish a cluster of satellite churches in the regions (Phil. 4:2-3; Col. 1:6-7).

Paul's declaring all the Corinthian believers to be saints was quite a declaration in light of the things—very evident from the rest of this letter—that characterized their living. The Corinthian church was far from being saintly in the sense in which the term is often used. They were particularly worldly and immoral, yet in his opening words Paul stressed that every one of them who had truly believed in Jesus Christ was saved and was a saint. Virtually the entire letter of 1 Corinthians, beginning with 1:10, deals with wrong doctrine and wrong behavior. Yet before Paul took the Corinthians to task for their failure as Christians, he carefully and lovingly reminded them that they *were* Christians. They belonged to God and to each other in a far-reaching fellowship.

It is evident from these opening words that these men and women of Corinth had been profoundly converted, even though as new believers some of their number continued to wrestle with various expressions of unholiness.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 1

3. Blessing (1:3)

³*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Finally, Paul's introductory words also reminded the Corinthians of God's ongoing care and concern for them.

'Grace' (*charis*) is the characteristic New Testament greeting, paralleled by 'peace' (*eirēnē*), the Old Testament greeting (*shālôm*). The one flows from the other, but both come only from God the Father. Note again the emphasis on unity, since we all have only one Father. And both are mediated to us solely through the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Four times in three verses the Lord Jesus is referred to, so that there is no doubt where Paul wants his readers to direct their attention. Everything centers on Christ. But, unfortunately, this is not the current state of affairs at Corinth.

'Grace' is God's unexpected and undeserved mercy shown in the death of Christ for our salvation (Eph. 2:8) which has made possible 'peace with God' (Rom. 5:1) and the 'peace of God' (Phil. 4:7). 'Peace' implies that the believer possesses every conceivable benefit. The Corinthians in the assembly had come to know these blessings of grace and peace in recent days through the preaching of the gospel by Paul and his colleagues (2 Cor. 1:19-22).

Sadly, 'Corinthianism' didn't die with the Corinthians. It is still alive and well in our churches. Like them we know what it is to throw off God's authority and become contaminated and confused by the world. We also know what it is to be so paralyzed by moral laxity and doctrinal uncertainty that we fail to appreciate our privileges or live up to our potential. We also know what it is to be so stricken with the sickness of our world that we are powerless to carry the life-giving medicine of the gospel to others. But we have this record of how Paul helped the Corinthians with their contamination and confusion, and it can help us too. The God of grace and peace is still speaking to us! He doesn't write off His children as soon as we fall into the world's evil ways, or as soon as we uncritically adopt the world's thinking. He continues to be concerned about us and to call us to grace and peace. This very letter is a token of His grace, and obedience to its teachings will bring us to a posture of peace in the midst of a trying world.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 1:4-17.