

CORINTH: A DIVIDED CHURCH

What do you know about the church at Corinth? What about Corinth itself?

Because of the problems in the church at Corinth the letters that Paul wrote to them are some of the most practical guides for us today. Wouldn't you think people would have gotten better since Paul wrote to Corinth? Why/why not?

To better understand Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, we need to know something about the city,

Corinth

– a Grecian city, on the isthmus which joins the Peloponnesus to the mainland of Greece. It is about 48 miles west of Athens. The ancient city was destroyed by the Romans (146 B.C.), and that mentioned in the New Testament was quite a new city, having been rebuilt about a century afterwards and peopled by a colony of freedmen from Rome. It became under the Romans the seat of government for Southern Greece or Achaia (Acts 18:12-16). It was noted for its wealth, and for the luxurious and immoral and vicious habits of the people. It had a large mixed population of Romans, Greeks, and Jews. When Paul first visited the city (A.D. 51 or 52), Gallio, the brother of Seneca, was proconsul. Here Paul resided for eighteen months (18:1-18). Here he first became acquainted with Aquila and Priscilla, and soon after his departure Apollos came to it from Ephesus. After an interval he visited it a second time, and remained for three months (20:3). During this second visit his Epistle to the Romans was written (probably A.D. 55 A.D.). Although there were many Jewish converts at Corinth, yet the Gentile element prevailed in the church there.

Some have argued from 2 Cor 12:14; 13:1, that Paul visited Corinth a third time (i.e., that on some unrecorded occasion he visited the city between what are usually called the first and second visits). But the passages referred to only indicate Paul's intention to visit Corinth (comp. 1 Cor 16:5, where the Greek present tense denotes an intention), an intention which was in some way frustrated. We can hardly suppose that such a visit could have been made by the apostle without more distinct reference to it.

1. THE CITY OF CORINTH

By the time Paul got to Corinth it had been built, destroyed and rebuilt several times. It is located on the isthmus connecting two seaports. The Aegean Sea was to the east and the Mediterranean and Adriatic Seas on the west. It was a natural crossroads for commerce.

Corinth was destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C; rebuilt by Julius Caesar a century later, and populated with Roman war veterans and freedmen*. It became a typical Roman city. By the time Paul got there it had become the capital of the province of Achaia, which included most of Greece south of Macedonia, including Athens. It was, at the same time, a Greek city in its interest in culture, philosophy, and religion.

The characteristic for which Corinth is most renowned, however, was immorality. Not only sexual promiscuity typical of seaports, but the culture itself promoted pagan worship of Aphrodite (Greek) (Venus: Roman) with 1000 temple prostitutes.

At the time Paul wrote this letter, if you called someone a "Corinthian," you meant they were sexually immoral.

This is the place that Paul founded a Christian church.

* Cf. Acts 6:9

FREEDMAN

The term occurs in 1 Cor 7:22; Col 3:11, and Rev 6:15, and represents two slightly different words. In 1 Cor 7:22 the word is *apeleutheros*, "a freeman," one who was born a slave and has received freedom. In this case it refers to spiritual freedom. He that was in bondage to sin has been presented with spiritual freedom by the Lord. In Rev 6:15 the word is simply *eleutheros*, "a free man" as opposed to a slave.

(from International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Electronic Database Copyright © 1996, 2003, 2006 by BibleSoft, Inc. All rights reserved.)

2. CHURCH PLANTING IN CORINTH

Acts 18

During Paul's second missionary journey, when he crossed over from Asia Minor into Macedonia, he came to Athens (Acts 17:15) and Corinth (Acts 18:1). He met a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla, who had been expelled from Rome (Acts 18:2-3). He went first to the synagogue (Acts 18:4-5). The Jews rejected his message and he turned to the Gentiles (Acts 18:6-7). Many believed (Acts 18:8). Paul's vision (Acts 18:9-11).

Some time after Gallio became governor, the Jewish opponents of the Gospel charged Paul with persuading people to "worship God contrary to the law" (Acts 18:12-13) (Jewish, not Roman law). Gallio considered the charge nothing more than quibbling over technicalities of the Jewish religion (Acts 18:14-16). The Jewish mob vented their anger on Sosthenes (Acts 18:17). Cf. 1 Cor 1:1

With a shaky start, the church at Corinth is established. Paul's first letter to Corinth was written from Ephesus (Acts 16:8) several years after his visit. Despite all the problems, Paul has high hopes for this church.

3. THE CHURCH AT CORINTH: ITS DYNAMISM

1 Cor 1:1-9

Paul clearly states his authority; he identifies Sosthenes as a brother; the church is "sanctified" in spite of its troubles; this church is part of every other Christian church. Paul notes their gifts before he deals with their problems.

1 Cor 1:1

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

The custom of letters was to identify the writer at the start; much more sensible than putting it at the end of the letter.

Because Paul's authority is being questioned (1 Cor 9:1) he reminds the Corinthians that he is "called to be an apostle."

Paul's calling was direct from Jesus Christ in his conversion first mentioned in Acts 9:1-6 and repeated in Acts 26:9-20. Paul says his commission was settled before his birth (Gal 1:15-16).

... and Sosthenes *our* brother,

Some scholars dispute that this Sosthenes is the one in Acts 18:17 but it would be curious if the Holy Spirit refers to a different “Sosthenes” without making a distinction. E.g. “Judas, not Iscariot.” John 14:22.

Paul regards Sosthenes as a brother in Christ.
The NT has 193 usages of the term “brethren.”
This term includes the sisters in many cases.

1 Cor 1:2

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:

To the church of God which is at Corinth,

In spite of its many problems Paul says this is an *ecclesia*, a group of “called out” ones, an assembly, or a local church.

No local church is perfect. Someone said, “If you find a perfect church, don’t join it because then it will no longer be perfect.”

... to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus,

A church is the people and is made up of those who have been set apart, “sanctified” by God for His purpose and use.
Sanctification is a process of being conformed to the image of Christ.

Justification is a once for all time act of God the Holy Spirit. A person is either justified or condemned. And every one who is justified is being sanctified.

We have a perfect sanctification in Christ and we have a personal sanctification that continues from the moment of our justification until we pass into glory.

A good illustration of this is when the Hebrew children under the leadership of Joshua, were commanded to enter Canaan and possess the land.

Contrary to the popular notion that Canaan is a picture of heaven it is a picture of the Christian warfare. The Lord gave them the land and it was theirs. That is a picture of our perfect sanctification in Christ. However, the people still had to enter the land and fight the wars. That is a picture of personal sanctification.

... called *to be* saints,

Because the Roman Catholic Church has corrupted the word “saint” we tend to avoid using it. A saint is not someone “beatified” by the Catholic Church but rather one who has been called a saint by God in Jesus Christ.

... with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord,

Paul writes to a given local church in Corinth but as with all of the Scripture it has application to all Christians.

Note that our worship is directed to Jesus Christ our Lord.
The “name” is the authority of His person.

... both theirs and ours:

There must be unity in the church because there is one Lord.
Paul is going to address the schism that has developed in the church at Corinth.

1 Cor 1:3

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

This greeting is common in the NT and suggests that it was perhaps a “password”.
Grace always comes before peace; there is no peace without grace.

... from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

According to Greek the linking of ‘God’ and ‘Lord’ under a common preposition ‘from’ indicates equality.

1 Cor 1:4

I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus,

... I thank my God always concerning you

Paul was thankful that “my God” had planted a church in a place like Corinth. Although his letter contains strong rebukes he is sincerely thankful for them.

... for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus,

The grace of God has its foundation in Jesus Christ.

1 Cor 1:5

... that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge,

The Corinthians were made rich by the grace of God and were gifted in speech and knowledge. It is the sinful abuse of these gifts that prompted Paul to write this letter. Cf. 1 Cor 2:1-4, 13; 4:19ff; 13:1.

1 Cor 1:6

... even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you,

The genuineness of their testimony is confirmed by the Holy Spirit. Cf. 1 Cor 2:4.

1 Cor 1:7

... so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

They lacked nothing in spiritual gifts.

... eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

All of the early Christians expected the soon return of Christ. The Corinthians were beginning to have doubts, due to their richness. Cf. 1 Cor 15:12.

1 Cor 1:8

... who will also confirm you to the end, *that you may be blameless* in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The “who” in vs. 8 is the Lord Jesus Christ.

The very one who saved you will keep you to the end of the age.

... *that you may be blameless*

This Greek word, according to Vines, means more than just acquittal, it means that no charge or accusation can be brought against a person. Cf. Rom 8:33; Col 1:22.

... in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is another proof of the deity of Jesus Christ because God will “judge the world through Jesus Christ.” Rom 2:16; Acts 17:31

1 Cor 1:9

... God *is* faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

One thing that all Christians should keep in their thoughts, “God is faithful.”

Cf. 1 Cor 10:13; 1 Thess 5:24; Rom 8:30; Phil 1:6

... by whom

Whenever God the Father and Christ are mentioned together in the Bible origination is always attributed to the Father and mediation to Christ. Cf. 1 Cor 8:6

... you were called into the fellowship of His Son,

Christians are called to be united with Christ. Cf. Col 3:4

... Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus Christ is mentioned more often in 1 Corinthians than in any other epistle and it may have been Paul’s design to direct their attention to Christ instead of some favorite teacher, viz. Paul, Apollos, or Cephas.

4. THE CHURCH AT CORINTH: ITS DIVISIONS

1 Cor 1:10-17

The first problem is divisions over personalities. We should keep in mind that this church was divided on all the issues; preachers (1:12-4:21); morals (5:1-13); lawsuits in heathen courts (6:1-11); marriage (7:1-40); eating meat offered to idols (8:1-10:33); the place of women in the church (11:1-16); the Lord's Supper (11:17-34); spiritual gifts (12:1-14:40); and the resurrection (15:1-58).
You think you've got problems?

The division over personalities greatly distressed Paul because he and Apollos and Peter were not rivals.

1 Cor 1:10

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.

... Now I plead with you, brethren,

“Now” begins the rebuke. Paul opened with thanksgiving and now is going to show them that their behavior is inconsistent with their testimony.

... brethren,

Brethren should not have factions over personalities.

... by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

There is one Name [authority] so there must not be a party spirit.

... that you all speak the same thing,

The necessary thing is that all the preachers speak the same thing or there can be no unity of spirit.

... and *that* there be no divisions among you,

There must be no internal strife among the preachers that will cause harm to the church.

... but *that* you be perfectly joined together

And any differences must be mended.

... in the same mind and in the same judgment.

In order to have unity of judgment they must forego their party-spirit.

1 Cor 1:11

For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's *household*, that there are contentions among you.

Apparently the elders of the church at Corinth did not mention these divisions in their letter to Paul; however, he had been informed of them by members of Chloe's household.

... contentions

The divisions are serious and have developed into contentions.

... among you

This indicates that the church is still together and had not yet broken up.

1 Cor 1:12

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."

It is as each one has their own favorite preacher. There is no indication that there were doctrinal differences but rather favoritism based on speech [Apollos was a fine orator]; or ethnicity [Paul and Peter were Jews].

Then to top them all, "I am of Christ."

1 Cor 1:13

Is Christ divided?

Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

... Is Christ divided?

What a perfect way to deal with a party-spirit!

... Was Paul crucified for you?

Paul's greatest argument is "who suffered?"

Isn't it foolish to claim Paul [or Apollos, or Cephas]?

... Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

It was Christ who was crucified and it is unto Christ that baptism is focused. To be baptised in any other name would be to deny Christ.

1 Cor 1:14

I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,

1 Cor 1:15

... lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name.

Here Paul guards against the idea that one person's baptism was superior to another person's because of who administered the baptism.

1 Cor 1:16

Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other.

Paul is reminded that he did baptize the household of Stephanas.

Before someone takes "household" to include children they need to compare with 1 Cor 16:15 where it says the household devoted themselves to service, which could not reasonably be said of children.

1 Cor 1:17

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.

How important is baptism?

Other passages show that baptism is a command for believers to obey.

What Paul is proving here that baptism and the Gospel are separate things.

Obviously baptism is not essential to salvation.

So to say that baptism is “in order to be saved” makes the sufficiency of the cross void.

Also, Paul says that the Gospel message stands on its own and does not need to be dressed up with wisdom of words.