

November 30

1 Corinthians 1-4

Today the Book of I Corinthians. This letter was written to the church **Paul established in the city of Corinth during his second missionary journey**. The record of the establishment of the church is found in **Acts chapter 18**. So Paul alone, perhaps sick, journeyed on alone with his confidence badly shaken to the famous city of Corinth. It was "famous" for iniquity. A wide open port city, it lent its name to furnish the ancient world with a picturesque word for sexual immorality. To "Corinthianize" was to behave in sexually promiscuous and lewd ways.

Paul worked in Corinth with Aquila and Priscilla for about 18 months to found the church there before opposition became sufficiently strong to place him once again on trial before the Roman authorities.

The letter we began today to read was written from Ephesus, at some point during the three year period described in Acts chapters 19 and 20. Paul has heard news about the Corinthian Church -- in fact later in our letter we will find that he has already written them one letter -- a letter which was lost to posterity and the Corinthians have written him a letter as well. We will find him answering the specific questions that they asked. He has also got news of the church from Chloe's people -- slaves perhaps of some wealthy Christian woman or just maybe members of a house church (a small group! that met at Chloe's house). In is to that news that he is responding in these first few chapters.

Now, just about the first thing we discovered about the Corinthian Church is that it was a church with problems -- big ones. Some of them are quite extensive and all of them sound pretty contemporary.

Problem #1 is that there is no unity in the church. They are divided into warring camps -- each one centered around someone who has been a prominent teacher in the church (either the Corinthian Church itself -- or the larger church of Christ). One group says they follow Paul, a second group follows Apollos, a third -- Peter or Cephas and finally there was a group that apparently was saying, "We follow no man but Christ only." That sounded pious but apparently they were just as divisive as the others.

Friends, we need to be reminded that disunity -- disharmony in a church is a very grave sin. Yes, that is the right word to use. On the night he was betrayed, in his great high priestly prayer for the church, Jesus prayed that we would be one, that we would demonstrate such unity and oneness that the whole world would know that we were His disciples. He said that by our love for one another and by our unity with each other, the world would know first of all that we are His disciples and secondly by the same unity the world would judge the validity of His claim to be deity. Disunity in the church then is not simply a fact of life -- something we regret but can't do anything about, it is a terrible sin -- something of which we must by God's grace repent and renounce.

At this point it is probably important to note together that honest disagreement is not necessarily disunity. We can disagree without being disagreeable, without being fractured into divisive parties. Unity and unanimity is not the same thing. We don't have to always be unanimous but we do always have to be "one." That is the constant message of St. Paul and indeed of the entire New Testament. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus," he writes in the little letter to the Philippians -- he humbled himself. "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and in purpose."

That was according to what we read in the book of Acts, one of the great traits of the early church. They were one in heart and purpose. Well the church in Corinth was not one in heart and mind. It was fractured and Paul says "that is your first great problem". How dare you form into little parties to follow Paul or Peter or Apollos. That is crazy! Is Christ divided? Were you baptized as followers of Paul or of Peter? Of course not! Don't be fools.

****Since we know there were no substantial differences between the content of the teaching of Paul and Peter (who though he had never visited Corinth, must have been known via letter and report) and since Paul never mentions any points of doctrine upon which he and Apollos -- a great early teacher in Corinth -- disagree, we may safely surmise that the attraction to one or another of these leaders had little to do with substance but everything to do with style -- style of speaking or style of leadership. Paul's remarks in the chapters we read today would seem to substantiate that view. He says he came with simple "foolish" words -- a message that seemed weak to the Jews because it proclaimed a crucified Savior, and illogical to the Greeks who wanted to reason everything through and for whom the message of Christ seemed foolish.

He says that he deliberately eschewed fancy words and the use of rhetoric in which he was undoubtedly well-schooled. "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified ... My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (2:2-4).

It is in the context of making this point that Paul enunciates one of the most important principles of scripture regarding God's chosen instruments. God, he says, deliberately chooses weak, common, foolish, "no thing" instruments to do His work so that when all is said and done no one will make the mistakes of attributing His wonderful work to someone or something else. This is an explanation of God's ways in dealing with men and it is also a great source of encouragement to us because it means God can use us. Our "ordinariness" does not disqualify us, in fact, it makes us easier for Him to use!

I am sure as you read chapter 3, you took note of Paul's solemn reminder that we ourselves "are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in" us. That is a very important

concept because it means of course that we must keep God's dwelling place clean, holy and fit for His habitation. Tomorrow, we will see that the second major problem in the Corinthian Church was gross sexual immorality. It is because we as believers are the temples of the Holy Spirit, that purity is so important to our lifestyles. But, in the passage we read today the chief issue is lack of unity. **I often wonder what the Lord thinks of His church today both in individual churches and in the body of Christ at large.** There is today a great deal of disunity that cannot be pleasing to the Father to whom Jesus prayed, "I pray that you will make them one."

The church in Corinth then had some big problems but I hope you noted in the introduction to the **letter Paul says some pretty confident things about her.** He says that the Corinthian Church has been enriched in everything -- in knowledge and in the ability to communicate that knowledge and also in the spiritual gifts (we will have much more to say about that later) God has given to empower their witness and testimony to the truth.

Paul is confident, in spite of the tremendous failings of this congregation, God will keep them strong to the end so that they will be blameless in the day of Christ's coming. Why? Not because the Corinthians are mature or even particularly trustworthy, but because God is faithful. In another place he puts it this way: "Though we are faithless, yet He remains faithful."