

LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH: 1 CORINTHIANS

Week 2: A Church Divided Against Itself

INTRODUCTION

- I. Authorship
- II. City of Corinth
- III. Paul's Contacts with the Church

ANALYSIS

I. INTRODUCTION, 1:1–9

- A. Salutation, 1:1–3
- B. Thanksgiving, 1:4–9

We may be surprised as we read these verses that Paul is able to thank God for the Corinthians' spiritual giftedness, even though they are abusing their gifts and thus causing him grief. But the apostle recognized that the problem lies not in their gifts, but in their attitude toward these gifts. Their spiritual gifts come from God and thus God can and should be thanked for giving them.

(1:4) I always my thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.

Paul commonly gives thanks for those who have been saved under his ministry, as well as for other Christians. There is always some evidence of the grace of God in every saved person, so Paul can genuinely thank God for the Corinthian believers. The reason for Paul's thanksgiving in their case is God's "grace given you in Christ Jesus."

(1:5) For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—

Paul now lists the specific "graces" for which he is giving thanks. The Corinthians "have been enriched," Paul says, "in every way" or "in every respect." But Paul focuses on their "speech" and "knowledge." Paul selects these two areas almost certainly because they were noticeably evident and highly prized in the church.

The term "speech" (*logos*) here probably refers especially to the many gifts of utterance noted in chapters 12–14 such as knowledge, wisdom, tongues, prophecy, etc. "Knowledge" in chapters 12–14 refers to the gift of special knowledge, probably related to prophetic revelation (12:8; 13:2; 14:6).

(1:6) God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you.

The Corinthians becoming rich in spiritual gifts (v. 5) is the confirmation of the genuineness of Paul's testimony of Christ among them.

(1:7) Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.

The Corinthians potentially have at their disposal all the gifts of God. Paul then adds that such gifts are to be used in the context of coming of "our Lord Jesus Christ."

(1:8) He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We may be surprised that Paul should express such confidence in the Corinthian church, since their current behavior leaves much to be desired. And, as we will see, on numerous occasions Paul will exhort them with the strongest kinds of warning.

(1:9) God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

All that Paul has said in the thanksgiving about God's grace toward the Corinthians, both in past and in the future, is now summed up in this glorious exclamation in which Paul connects the truth of God's faithfulness to his calling of believers.

II. A CHURCH DIVIDED: INTERNALLY AND AGAINST PAUL, 1:10–4:21

The problem that Paul addresses at the beginning of this letter is one that many of us can easily identify with—divisions in the church. Quarrels within a church is, unfortunately, not an uncommon phenomenon. Although the Corinthians were quarreling with one another over their leaders (1:10–12), nothing in chapters 1–4 indicates that they were deeply divided on issues so that they were actually breaking up into separate groups.

The problem in 1:10–4:21 seems to be centered around four main issues.

First, there is “quarreling” and “divisiveness” among them that centered around loyalty to their various teachers.

Second, this quarreling is in some way related to the idea of “wisdom”—wisdom in the Greek philosophical tradition. The Greek words *wisdom (sophia)* and *wise (sophos)* are prominent in the discussion throughout chapters 1–3.

Third, also associated with these first two items are the repeated references to the Corinthian's “boasting” (1:29–31; 3:21; 4:7) and being “puffed up” (4:6, 18–19). The quarrels took the form of boasting in mere men, apparently in the name of wisdom (3:18–21; cf. 4:6).

Fourth, it seems altogether likely that the quarreling over their leaders is not just *for* Apollos or Cephas, but is to some degree *against* Paul.

How these four issues fit together is not all together clear. The problem most probably stemmed from certain Hellenistic influences in the background of the Corinthians, especially the emphasis on rhetoric in the Greco-Roman world. This emphasis was especially prevalent among certain itinerant teacher/philosophers called sophists, who were more concerned with polished oration than with significant content. These philosopher/orators were drawn from the ranks of the educated elite. They secured a large public following who paid to hear their lectures on various subjects. Oratory was much admired in the Greco-Roman world since it was a requirement in order to participate in public life. It was expected that these sophist orators would have a charismatic presence, including a striking physique, a well-resonated voice, an impressive wardrobe, and a commanding presence.

In dealing with this first problem in the Corinthian church, three issues need to be set straight:

1. The Corinthians' misunderstanding of the gospel.
2. Their erroneous perception as to the nature of the church and their teachers.
3. Paul must correct both of these errors while at the same time reasserting his own authority over them.

A. The Problem: Division over Leaders in the Name of Wisdom, 1:10–17

1. An exhortation for unity, 1:10

(1:10) I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.

Paul's appeal is expressed both negatively and positively. Positively, Paul urges that they "agree with one another" and that they "be perfectly united in mind and thought." Negatively, there should "be no divisions among" them.

2. The problem stated, 1:11

(1:11) My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.

Paul says that he had learned about their divisions from communication he had from Chloe's household. The text does not say where Chloe is from.

These people from Chloe's household have informed Paul that "there are quarrels" among the Corinthians.

3. Detailed explanation of the problem, 1:12

(1:12) What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

The church at Corinth is experiencing quarrels, which are being generated in the names of their various leaders, although it is unlikely that the leaders themselves are party to it. This is obviously true of Paul and Christ; the evidence of 16:12 demands that Paul did not think that Apollos was guilty in any way. Of Peter and his presence there, nothing certain can be known. So we should conclude that the church has fallen into a love with argumentation in which some of the Corinthians are boasting in themselves by supposing that their views about the gospel—incorrect views—actually comes from one of their leaders. They think of the leaders they rally around as teachers of wisdom in the Greek philosophical tradition.

4. Paul's objections to the situation, 1:13–17

(1:13) Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?

We see here that Paul is quite upset at what he has learned from Chloe's household. Paul's arguments are designed to help his readers see the total absurdity of their own position. The questions that Paul asks represents logical extensions of their slogans, yet in each case the question also demands a strongly negative response on the part of the Corinthians.

The verb "divided" ("Is Christ divided?") has the idea that Christ has been apportioned out as only one among many—on an equal level with the other leaders. And by parceling out Christ as one among others, and by saying "I am of Paul, etc.," they must allow then that Paul, too, could have been crucified for them or that they had been baptized into Paul's name.

To be baptized “into the name of” someone means that the one baptized has turned over their allegiance, and thus has given themselves to the one named in the rite. But since they were not baptized into Paul’s name, by that very fact they cannot say “I am of Paul.”

(1:14) I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, (1:15) so no one can say that you were baptized in my name.

After mentioning the absurd idea in v. 13 that anyone should be baptized in his name, Paul goes on to say how grateful he is that he baptized so few, a case of providential good fortune. This circumstance prevents those who are following him from making the absurd statement in v. 13, that they were baptized into the name of Paul.

(1:16) (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don’t remember if I baptized anyone else.)

Paul then remembers something, or possibly Stephanas reminds Paul as he is dictating. Stephanas was one of men who possibly brought the Corinthian letter to Paul (cf. 16:15–17).

(1:17) For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

“I do not remember if I baptized anyone else.” For, Paul explains “Christ did not send me to baptize.” Paul’s calling was as an apostle whose mission was to evangelize and plant churches—other Christians could baptize.

After making it clear what he did not come to do (“to baptize”), Paul moves on to what he did come to do—“preach the gospel.” He further describes this task with a remarkable contrast: “not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ should be rendered ineffective.”

To follow “wisdom and eloquence” alone Paul says, is to render the cross of Christ ineffective or to empty it of its power. Barrett in his commentary says: “Paul represents himself as a preacher, not as an orator. Preaching is the proclamation of the cross; it is the cross that is the source of its power. The convincing power of the cross could not be fully manifest if preaching shared too evidently in the devices of human rhetoric; if men are persuaded by eloquence they are not persuaded by Christ crucified” (p. 49).