

LETTERS OF ST. PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS

CHAPTER 1

PROLOGUE TO FIRST CORINTHIANS

INTRODUCTION

Rome destroyed Corinth in 146 B.C., under the command of Lucius Mummius. It was rebuilt in 44 B.C., under the command of Julius Caesar. Rome populated the city with Italians, but it soon became the melting pot of the Mediterranean world. Some believe that Paul was looking at the general population of Corinth when he wrote: *“They are filled with every kind of wickedness.”* In Romans 1:29-32 he described this wickedness.

The foundation of the Church at Corinth dramatically demonstrated to Paul the power of the gospel and the providence of God in his own personal life. Here in Corinth, Paul personally experienced what he later wrote the Romans: *“I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God leading everyone who believes in it to salvation, the Jew first, then the Greek. For in the gospel is being manifested the righteousness of God”* (Rom.1:16-17).

Paul arrived in Corinth around 50 A.D. During his first stay in Corinth, Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians. He testified to the Jewish opposition to the Church in Corinth: *“Displeasing to God and hostile to all mankind, they try to keep us from preaching salvation to the Gentiles”* (1Thes.2:15-16). However, the Christian Community was established in Corinth, and was composed of Jews and Greeks; many were poor and ignorant, a few were rich and learned.

After about eighteen months in Corinth, Paul departed with Prisca and Aquila for Asia Minor. After returning to Antioch and visiting the churches in the Galatian country, Paul came to Ephesus where he had left Prisca and Aquila. Here he would work for about three years. From Ephesus he wrote the letter we now call his “first” letter to the Corinthians.

TROUBLE IN CORINTH

There is certainly an interesting history behind this letter. Paul left a Church at peace, both with him and itself. After his departure other teachers came to Corinth. Later Paul wrote to the Philippians: *“It is true, some preach Christ from motives of envy and rivalry, but others do so out of good will. ...others promote Christ, not from pure motives but as an intrigue against me...”* (Phil.1:15,17).

About two years passed and Paul began to receive disturbing reports about the Church at Corinth. The Congregation was splitting into rival groups centering on their favorite teachers. More serious problems than divisiveness were reported. There were cases of immorality in the Church.

Paul wrote a letter around the spring of 55, in which he warned the community not to associate with immoral people. From what we read in First Corinthians (5:9), they misinterpreted his letter. Shortly afterward, Paul received a letter from the Corinthians in which they put a series of questions to him. Paul made reference to this in the first chapter of First Corinthians.

By the time Paul wrote our first letter to the Corinthians, he had gathered a rather accurate picture of the spiritual state of the Christian Community there. The picture was not good: there was divisiveness among the members and a laxity in administering discipline; they tolerated gross immorality, and carried their disputes into secular courts. They were disorderly in their observance of the Lord's Supper. Some were denying the resurrection of the dead. They indicated in their letter that they desired information concerning marriage, eating meat sacrificed to idols, and the proper use of spiritual gifts.

The attitude of the Church at Corinth toward Paul appears to be that of children who feel they have outgrown their father. Paul's attitude toward them appears to be ambivalent, suggestive of the love-hate relationship often characterized in parent's reaction to adolescent rebellion. Paul probably detected that the Corinthians were not being perfectly frank with him in the questions they addressed to him; as we would say, they were not playing with a full deck. They did not seek information on questions of which they were ignorant, but ones over which they were in dispute. Behind these polite questions, Paul detected resentment toward himself. He got the feeling of being subjected to an examination in which he must defend himself.

GENERAL CONTENTS OF THE LETTER

Paul deals with the varied subjects presented in a discernible, logical order. As one reflects upon the organization of the letter, one must admire the

wisdom of Paul. The first nine verses of the letter set the theme: union with Christ. Paul dwells upon the relationship of the Christian with Jesus Christ. Union with Jesus Christ is the heart of Christian Spirituality. This vital relationship gives unity to the entire letter. In the first four chapters, Paul demonstrates that the integrity of the union between the Christian and Jesus Christ is threatened by factions and divisions. In chapters five and six he teaches that sexual immorality destroys union with Christ. In chapter seven he shows how marriage is a symbol of the holiness of this union. Chapters eight through ten demonstrate that this union is desecrated by idolatry. Chapter eleven teaches how this union is actualized by the reception of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, and twelve through fourteen teach how it is disgraced by the disorder in community worship. Chapter fifteen teaches that our union with Jesus Christ is completed and consummated by our resurrection from the dead. Chapter sixteen deals with a practical application of this union: a collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem.

FIRST NINE VERSES

The opening of Paul's letter, like the overture of an orchestral work, sounds the themes that will be expanded in the letter. He follows the accepted protocol of letter writing by identifying himself, greeting the recipients of the letter, and offering thanksgiving to God. The introduction formula is truly loaded. He is not only Paul the apostle but "*Paul, called by God's will to be an apostle of Christ Jesus.*" He writes therefore with God-given authority. In his role as apostle he is not inferior to Cephas, and by his call he is superior to Apollos.

In a few words Paul describes the Christian Vocation: "*consecrated in Christ Jesus and called to be a holy people.*" There are no individual greetings. The spirit of individuality is already too great in Corinth. He greets the community. He ardently desires that they come to an awareness of themselves as a community. They are the "Assembly of God." They are no ordinary gathering of people who have assembled because of mutual interests. This Church is a work of God, a divine creation. The Church of God is entirely God's creation. With his very first notes, Paul describes the unworldliness of the Church. He proceeds to speak of the members composing this Community as people "consecrated." Paul does not address them as "saints," but he reminds them, as consecrated people, they are "called to be a holy people." He emphasizes their individual responsibility to be a holy people, to be a holy community. Paul was underlining "holy" because that signified a separation from this profane world, and purification of its contamination, in order that

as People of God, their dedication to God would truly be honorable and worthy.

One of the major causes of division in Corinth resulted from pride in the spiritual gifts received. What the Holy Spirit gave for building up the Community was being perverted into instruments of self-glorification and divisiveness. Paul acknowledges in his prayer of thanksgiving the abundance of spiritual gifts received by the Community. However, he seeks to torpedo their pride by emphasizing that these gifts come from God to whom all glory is due. Paul thanks God for what they have received, and subtly implies they still have a long way to go *“as you wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* They are turning in upon themselves. They are losing sight of the Lord. Paul seeks to raise their eyes and behold this Lord to whom one day they must give an account for their membership in the Church of God, as they stand before the seat of eternal judgment.

In the first nine verses, the Name of Jesus appears eight times and that of Christ, nine times. The notes are played loud and clear, Jesus Christ is the heart and essence of the Christian Life. All Christian holiness depends upon being united heart and soul with Jesus Christ.

ERIS IN THE CHURCH

Paul used the formal part of his letter to describe what ought to be the Church of God. Now he turns to deal with what is the Church in Corinth. He will struggle to bring the reality into some degree of harmony with the ideal. Paul comes immediately to the point--disunity within the Community. He appeals to the Church, in the name of Jesus Christ, to come to that unity of spirit that brothers in the Lord ought to possess. He writes: *“I have been informed, my brothers, by certain members of Chloe’s household that you are quarreling among yourselves” (1Cor.1:11).*

The word used to express quarreling is *eris*. Eris is a work of the flesh. It is closely connected to *echtra*, as a child is to its mother, as the fruit is to the tree. Echtra expresses the feeling and attitude of hatred towards another. Eris is the external expression of echtra, which incarnates itself as eris in quarrels, brawls, factions and divisiveness. Wherever there is eris there must be echtra. Paul immediately puts his finger on the problem--the spirit of agape-love has been destroyed. The Corinthians pride themselves on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, while they destroy the very life of the Holy Spirit within the Church.

CULTS IN THE COMMUNITY

Eris within the Christian Community was finding expression in individual cults. These cults were centered on great personalities like Christ, Cephas, Paul, and Apollos, but there was no true imitation of the personalities. Cultists support their own egos by assuming identification with their leader, but they become no more like their leader than a Dodger or Ram fan becomes like one of the players on the field. Cultists remain unchanged, while making the leader an extension of their own personalities. They pride themselves on the virtues, powers, and talents of the leader, as if they themselves personally possessed them.

Paul writes, *“This is what I mean: One of you will say, ‘I belong to Paul,’ another, ‘I belong to Apollos,’ still another, ‘Cephas has my allegiance,’ and the fourth, ‘I belong to Christ’”* (1Cor.1:12). Paul does not direct his argument against any one faction, but against the fact of division. *“I beg you, brothers, ...to agree in what you say, ...be united in mind and judgment”* (1Cor.1:10). He does not occupy himself with the beliefs and practices of any cult. He is concerned with the sinful divisive spirit pervading the Church that threatens the unity of the Body of Christ. The fundamental question of the whole passage is *“Has Christ, then, been divided into parts?”* Of course the answer would be in the negative. If Christ has not been divided, and the Community at Corinth has been divided, the deduction is clear: none of the cults are of Christ.

PAUL IS NO CULTIST

Paul not only rebukes the party spirit, but he makes it clear that he has never cultivated it by proposing himself as a cultic leader. He is an apostle of Jesus Christ. He has represented Jesus, and he had not presented Paul. God called him to preach the gospel, and Paul had indeed preached--Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Paul proclaimed that Christ sent him *“...to preach the gospel--not with wordy ‘wisdom,’ however, lest the cross of Christ be rendered void of its meaning!”* (1Cor.1:17). He tells the Corinthians, *“As for myself, brothers, when I came to you I did not come proclaiming God’s testimony with any particular eloquence or ‘wisdom.’ No, I determined that while I was with you I would speak of nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified...My message and my preaching had none of the persuasive force of ‘wise’ argumentation, but the convincing power of the Spirit. As a consequence, your faith rests not on the wisdom of men but on the power of God”* 1(1Cor.2:1-5). Was his preaching now a point for his condemnation?

The Greeks loved wisdom. They believed with Socrates that salvation lies in knowledge. Evil was a matter of ignorance. There was a great revival of old religions among the Greeks and Romans that promised to the initiated secret knowledge leading to salvation. No doubt, an intellectual elite had gathered around Apollos. Paul recognized in their attraction to the wisdom of this world a rejection of the “wisdom of the cross”, and a turning from Jesus Crucified. On the scale of human wisdom, Jesus Christ was found wanting as a Savior, “...*a stumbling block to Jews, and an absurdity to the Gentiles*” (1Cor.1:23). To the worldly mind there was no wisdom in Jesus, only tragedy and divine retribution. The Wisdom of God will always escape the mind of man as long as the deeds of God are examined from the point of view of man’s wisdom and measured by his logical standards. Man’s mind must be re-made in order to understand God’s workings in this world. Paul expressed it well in Romans: “*Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may judge what is God’s will, what is good, pleasing and perfect*” (Rom.12:2).

The Corinthians prided themselves upon their salvation, and the spiritual gifts lavished upon them. However, they have become enamored with the “wisdom” of this world. Paul forces a comparison between the lives of the Corinthian Christians and the “wise” of this world. He seeks to make them see that they themselves have come to true wisdom in Christ, while the wise men of this world have rejected Christ. For all their wisdom, these “wise men” have not come to true wisdom, and as a result are perishing. Paul concludes, “Yes, Jews demand ‘signs’ and Greeks look for ‘wisdom’ but we preach Christ crucified...” (1Cor.1:22). Paul implies that salvation does not flow from seeing miracles or hearing logical presentations, but through proclaiming the Word of God.

Paul seeks to attack the pride of the Corinthians. They viewed themselves as wise men, and they looked down on others not as wise as they. Paul delights in reminding them of their lowly origins, and points out to them that they are part of “God’s folly in this world.” Paul implies that they are fine peacocks now, walking around Corinth with a big tail spread, making shrill noises. But he reminds them they were once no more than poor field hands--cotton pickers. If it hadn't been for God’s grace they would never have been anything more. Paul maintains that God used them to destroy the pride of the proud, and to confound the strength of the strong. Of themselves, they have never been anything, and of themselves, they never will be. All they have is from God. If the gifts of God were withdrawn, what would they have? What

are their grounds for self-boasting? Paul writes, *“God it is who has given you life in Christ Jesus. He has made him our wisdom and also our justice, our sanctification, and our redemption. This is just as you find it written, ‘Let him who would boast, boast in the Lord’” (1Cor.1:30-31).*

St. Angela of Foligno once wrote, *“Dignities that puff up the soul are vanities that are accursed. Flee them, for they are dangerous; but listen, listen. They are less dangerous than spiritual vanities. To make a show that one knows how to speak about God, to understand the Scriptures, to accomplish miracles, to make a parade of one’s heart in the Divine--that is the vanity of vanities; and world vanities are after that supreme vanity, small faults quickly corrected.”*

St. Marie of Jesus Crucified once wrote, *“The proud man is like a grain of wheat thrown into water: it swells up, it gets big. Expose the grain to the sun: it dries out, it is burnt up. The humble man is like a grain buried in the earth: it goes down, it is hidden, it disappears, it dies, but in order to live again.”*

PROLOGUE TO FIRST CORINTHIANS
SCRIPTURE READINGS AND QUESTIONS

SCRIPTURE OF THE WEEK
(PLEASE MEMORIZE)

“GOD IT IS WHO HAS GIVEN YOU LIFE IN CHRIST JESUS. HE HAS MADE HIM OUR WISDOM AND OUR JUSTICE, OUR SANCTIFICATION, AND OUR REDEMPTION.” (1Corinthians 1:30.)

FIRST DAY: Read Acts of the Apostles 17:10-34.

- 1. What brought Paul to the city of Athens?**
- 2. What was the effect of this city upon Paul?**
- 3. What was Paul’s effect upon the city?**
- 4. What lesson do you learn about the apostolate from this reason?**

SECOND DAY: Read Summary Introduction; Acts 18:1-23.

- 1. How does the foundation of the Church in Corinth demonstrate in a special way the power of the gospel?**
- 2. In what way do we see the providence of God working in Paul’s life?**
- 3. What was Paul’s greatest obstacle in establishing the Church in Corinth?**
- 4. What kind of membership composed the Church in Corinth?**

THIRD DAY: Read Summary through First Nine Verses; 1Corinthians 1:1-9.

- 1. What appears to be the cause of the trouble in the Church at Corinth?**
- 2. In what way is one theme expressed throughout this letter?**
- 3. What is the essential message of Paul’s “greeting”?**

4. What do you learn from the Introduction to his letter?

FOURTH DAY: Read Summary through Cults in the Church; Acts 18:24-28; 1 Corinthians 1:10-17.

1. What does the presence of *eris* reveal about the Christian Community?

2. What is your impression of Apollos?

3. What do you understand as a Christian cult?

4. What purpose do you see that cults serve?

FIFTH DAY: Read Summary through Paul is No Cultist; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

1. What precautions did Paul take in order not to become a cultist leader?

2. What are the dangers of cults in the Christian Community?

3. What was Paul's opinion of the wisdom of the World?

4. What do you understand by 1 Corinthians 1:25?

SIXTH DAY: Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-2:5.

1. How did Paul try to humble the pride of the Corinthians?

2. What do you understand by 1 Corinthians 1:30?

3. How did Paul proclaim the gospel in Corinth?

4. What does this teach you about evangelizing?