

# Unity & Division

1 Corinthians 1:1-17

## Corinth: Worldly



In Paul's day, Corinth (the capital of the province Achaia) was a very significant city. As a crossroads for commercial traffic, along with its own large industries, it was a major center of commerce. It was a place of economic opportunity, and became home to a diverse population. Corinth became known as a place to pursue wealth and pleasure. Corinthian values included social status, occupation, income, wealth, education and knowledge, and the pursuit of luxury and sensual pleasure. Various religions and cults were practiced there. Corinthian characteristics included self-advancement, competitive individualism, self-importance and self-indulgence. Into this environment the apostle Paul entered on his second missionary journey (around A.D. 50). He stayed there 1½ years. While he was there, he planted the church. However, the church had its problems. While the church was supposed to influence the surrounding culture, the surrounding culture was influencing the church. There was too much "Corinth in the church." Around A.D. 55, Paul wrote a letter (1 Corinthians) to the church to address these problems.

## Paul & the Church: Called

□ Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-3.<sup>1</sup>

1. How does Paul address the church in Corinth?<sup>2</sup> Why do you think he uses these terms?

## God: Faithful

□ Read 1 Corinthians 1:4-9. Paul thanks God because He is the source of the good traits (qualities, characteristics) found in the Corinthian Christians. These traits include their enrichment in speech, knowledge, and other spiritual gifts.<sup>3</sup> However, later in his letter, Paul says they have wrong attitudes and actions concerning these abilities and gifts.

2. What lesson can we learn from this?

□ Paul tells the Corinthians that his "testimony about Christ was confirmed" in them (v. 6). In other words, the truth of Paul's testimony<sup>4</sup> (that is, the gospel) was confirmed through the spiritual gifts God had given them. In addition, that truth will continue to be confirmed in them until the end (v. 8).<sup>5</sup> God is faithful to complete His work of sanctification (vv. 8-9).

3. How is the gospel confirmed (shown to be true) through the lives of Christians today?

<sup>1</sup> Greek letters often began with the writer's name. Paul identifies himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." God called Paul to be an "apostle" (ἀπόστολος, *apostolos* – "one who is sent") – to be an ambassador of Jesus Christ. This establishes Paul's role, mission, and authority.

<sup>2</sup> "sanctified (ἡγιασμένοι, set apart), in Christ Jesus;" "called (by God) to be holy (ἅγιοι);" "together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – their Lord and ours."

<sup>3</sup> "speech" (λόγος, *logos*), "knowledge" (γνώσις, *gnosis*), "spiritual gift" (χαρίσμος, *charisma* = grace-gift)

<sup>4</sup> Paul's message concerning Christ, including his crucifixion (1:18-25) and resurrection (15:1-11) – the gospel.

<sup>5</sup> "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" refers to the end of this present age, when Christ returns.

- ❑ Again, Paul uses the word “called” (v. 9). God has called the Corinthian Christians (and *all* Christians) into fellowship<sup>6</sup> with his Son Jesus Christ. This emphasizes the unity that Christians should have in Christ.



## The Church: Divided

- ❑ Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. Paul has heard that there are quarrels and divisions<sup>7</sup> within the church in Corinth (vv. 10-11). Thus he urges them, as brothers and sisters, to “agree with one another” and be “perfectly united in mind and thought.” This includes sharing the same way of thinking, and avoiding partisanship.<sup>8</sup>
- ❑ Some degree of partisanship is evident in verse 12. It appears that the Corinthians were aligning themselves with particular leaders (Paul, Apollos, Cephas).<sup>9</sup>
  4. In verses 13-15,<sup>10</sup> Paul reveals the foolishness of their partisan spirit. What is wrong with their way of thinking?
  5. What types of things result in divisions and quarrels in the church today?

### *For Further Thought*

- Almost everyone wants some form of unity and peace. This lesson focuses on Christian unity, realized through total allegiance (devotion, loyalty) to Christ. The non-Christian might say this is just one example among many in which unity is achieved through total allegiance to a person, party, ideology or goal. What makes “Christian unity” unique?
- ❑ Paul says Christ sent him to “preach the gospel – not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” (v. 17) What does he mean? Return for Lesson 2!

### *Reflection/Application*

- As a Christian, do you feel that you are “perfectly united in mind and thought” with other believers in your fellowship? Have you experienced any quarrels or divisions? What are the causes? Attempt to identify any ways of thinking (in you) that are more worldly than biblical.
- If you are not a Christian, do you desire unity in your life? Do you want to be part of a community characterized by unity? What do you think of Christian community?

<sup>6</sup> “fellowship” (κοινωνία, *koinonia*) means “having in common, sharing, participating together.”

<sup>7</sup> “division” (σχίσμα, *schisma*) – division resulting from contention; literally, “tear” (of cloth)

<sup>8</sup> Partisanship (fervent support of a particular party, cause, or person) was common in Corinthian culture, as people aligned themselves with particular groups, ideas, philosophical schools, or personalities. Apparently, some degree of partisanship had infected the church and was contributing to the quarrels and divisions.

<sup>9</sup> The exact nature of the partisanship is unknown. Some scholars say that these verses imply an opposition to Paul. “Apollos” is mentioned in Acts 18:24-19:1. He was an “educated” (or “eloquent”) man, thoroughly knowledgeable in the Scriptures, and an effective speaker. (Intellectual and rhetorical skills were highly valued in Corinthian culture.) “Cephas” is the apostle Peter (John 1:42). There is no evidence that these leaders encouraged schools to develop around them. Their differences were probably not theological (though emphases may have varied). Factors involved in the choice of identification could include the personality of the leader, leader/student loyalty, and social stratification. Perhaps their identification with a particular leader boosted their self-perception of status or prestige.

<sup>10</sup> “baptized into the name of [Christ]” refers to Christian baptism in water, which signifies spiritual union with Christ. Paul does not downplay baptism, but he downplays the significance of the person who performs the baptism. They are neglecting the core of Christianity, which provides the basis for unity. The “core” is Christ crucified (as an atoning sacrifice) and resurrected, and the believer’s relationship with Him through faith.