

## **System Failure**

### **1 Corinthians 1:1-17**

We are beginning to study the book of 1 Corinthians, which is a letter written by the apostle Paul to a large church family in the ancient city of Corinth. Last week we looked at how the church began in Acts 18 and today we get into the letter itself. The church in Corinth grew fast. All kinds of different people had come to Christ and all of them were part of the same church at that time. As we get into the letter today, I want us to take some time to get to know the people this book was written to. What was going on in their church family? And why was this book written?

According to the NIV Study Bible, Corinth was a huge city of about 650,000 people in the first century AD. (Picture) Most of them, about 400,000 were slaves. In a number of ways it was the chief city of Greece. Because it was situated near an isthmus, it was a major passageway between two bodies of water. A huge amount of goods were being traded and transported across it on a major highway. That brought in traders and merchants from the East and the West.

It was also characterized by typical Greek culture – the people were interested in Greek philosophy and placed a high premium on wisdom. The primary religion of Corinth was the worship of Greek gods and goddesses. (Picture) It had several temples. The most prominent was the temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. But it also had a temple to Asclepius, the god of healing, and a temple to Apollo. There was a Jewish presence in the city as well and they had their own synagogue. The NIV Study Bible says that “Corinth was also a center for open and unbridled immorality.” There was rampant prostitution in the name of their religion, and the city was well-known for its sexual immorality.

Lots of money, worldliness, wickedness, slavery, philosophy, religion, idolatry, and prostitution – that’s what Corinth was like. That’s the setting that Paul walked into in about 50 AD to try to start a church. And it worked. From what we saw last week in Acts 18, the Holy Spirit moved, people turned to Jesus and the Corinthian church was born. It was a brand new church and still only about 5 years old when Paul wrote them this letter.

So at the beginning of the letter, he greets them and remembers what happened during the time he was with them...

Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-9.

*Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, <sup>2</sup> To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:*

*<sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*<sup>4</sup> I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup> that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— <sup>6</sup> even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— <sup>7</sup> so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>8</sup> who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Paul begins this letter with a greeting. You can see in the first three verses who it's from, who it's written to and Paul's opening blessing. There are some specific details that I'll point out later that tie in with what was going on in the church.

The greeting continues in verse 4 as he writes about the things that happened among the Corinthian believers – things that led him to praise God on many occasions. He remembers the abundant grace of God that was given to them through Christ during the many months he was with them. He remembers that they were enriched in Christ in every way – in all speech and all knowledge, which in verse 7 he links to spiritual gifts in those areas. Those gifts were poured out upon them, so much so, that in verse 7 he says that there were not lacking any spiritual gift.

In verse 6 he reminds them how the outpouring of God's grace on them in spiritual gifts was confirmation that they had truly received his testimony about Christ with open hearts and awakened spirits. In other words, they were born again by the Spirit of God when Paul was first sharing the gospel among them and one of the reasons he could tell was because the gifts of the Spirit in speech and knowledge were present in them.

So when Paul shared the gospel among them in 50 A.D. the power of God was clearly at work, bringing forth faith in their hearts and pouring out all kinds of spiritual gifts. He was so thankful for that and wanted them to know that as he

began this letter. It would have been amazing to see people from that culture come to Christ because of all the spiritual darkness they were in.

But all that cultural darkness that was in them didn't just disappear when they were born again. It wasn't washed from their memories or their thinking or learned behavior. It was still there and came into the church family with them – it's the same thing for everyone who comes to Christ. We come as we are. We don't have to get cleaned up first. We bring all our garbage with us where we can help one another through the lifelong process of sanctification. Christ receives us where we're at but doesn't want us to remain there. He wants to do a transforming work in our hearts so that we come to reflect him more and more.

The entire church in Corinth was in the beginning stages of that process. There weren't any mature believers besides Paul and his team. So when they moved on, problems began to surface – lots of problems in many different areas. There wasn't just one thing that needed to be addressed, like in some churches he wrote to, there were multiple issues threatening the survival of the church. Paul saw warnings of system failure. I think of a control room at a major power plant when screens start lighting up, buzzers go off, warning lights start flashing – something's wrong that is threatening the whole system, and that's what was happening in this church. Paul was very concerned. He saw all kinds of problems and that's why he wrote them this letter. It's an attempt to deal with multiple issues he'd heard about. He couldn't jump on a plane and meet with them in person, he had to send a letter until he could finally be there.

So the way this letter is composed is to deal with multiple problems and issues, one after another. There were moral problems as you can probably imagine. There were perspective problems with the way they were thinking and acting. There were theological problems. There were relational problems. There were even problems with the way they were thinking about him and some of the other apostles. If you go back and look at the verses we've already read, you can see traces of some of the problems by their words that Paul used.

In verse 1, Paul asserted that he was an apostle of Jesus, "called by the will of God" and part of the reason he wrote that was because some in the church were questioning his authority. In verse 2 he stressed that as a church of God they were sanctified in Christ and called to be saints because some in the church were conforming to the immorality of the culture around them. In verses 7-8 he

reminds them that Christ will return and mentions “guiltless” and I think he probably did that to remind them that they will one day have to give an account to Christ.

This would have been a very difficult letter for Paul to write as he had a mix of wonderful memories of what happened while he was there and serious issues that he had to confront them about. So it’s a letter about a church with all kinds of problems. And in a way it can make us feel kind of good, because they had worse problems than we do (in my opinion). But it should also make us cautious and be on our guard because it shows us how quickly and easily problems in churches can emerge. Some of the problems will be closely related to things we’re dealing with. Others will be more like warnings for us to watch out for. But my hope is that through the weeks that we spend in this book, the Holy Spirit will transform each of us and empower and equip us to grow as a church.

The first problem Paul addresses takes up the first four chapters of the book. It might be the most serious problem since it comes first and because it was threatening to tear apart the church. I want to introduce you to the problem and then we’ll pick up where we leave off when we come back next week.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-12.

*<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. <sup>11</sup> For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. <sup>12</sup> What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.”*

So they were quarreling about who they were following. Some, Paul himself – their founding pastor who worked among them for 18 months. Some, Apollos. According to Acts 18, he was a very gifted preacher – born and raised in Egypt. A Gentile. When he was in Corinth and other cities in that region, he powerfully and publicly refuted the Jews and showed from Scripture that Jesus indeed was the Messiah. He’s the kind of guy you want on your side in an argument or debate. Sharp, dynamic, and powerful. So a lot of Christians in Corinth were drawn to him. Some were also following Cephas, the apostle Peter, who was one of the most prominent Jewish leaders in the church. Jewish Christians especially would have been drawn to him. And then some were following Christ, which is an interesting

statement to think through. Weren't they all following Christ? Yes, but apparently some were careful to make it a point that they weren't following any of the other three, but "only Jesus."

So the dynamic that I see going on in that church is the same dynamic I see going on today, where people connect with and are drawn to certain pastors or preachers – they really like their preaching style or personality, they're able to relate with them, they maybe had a significant impact on their faith. These are the people today that we collect their books and listen to all their sermons, we watch them on YouTube or listen to them on the radio. We tend to elevate their preaching and doctrine above others and we become quite enthralled with and devoted to them: Matt Chandler, David Platt, Beth Moore, Joyce Meyer, John Piper, Priscilla Shirer, John MacArthur, Joel Osteen, Bill Johnson, Les Feldick, Chuck Swindoll, Francis Chan, Andy Stanley, Charles Stanley... Who's your favorite? We tend to side with our favorites and their theological perspectives and it often leads to quarreling and division.

Another piece of this dynamic that I see today are those who proudly proclaim, "I don't follow anyone but Jesus!" Which usually means they're thinking: "So my theology and perspective is actually right and pure and yours is flawed."

We'll look at this more next week but Paul could see a worldly behavior that was wreaking havoc on the church. The people in the church were doing the same thing that was happening in the public square. Philosophy was a big deal in Corinth and different philosophers would come – trained and gifted public speakers – to give their wisdom about the purpose for life. And people would be won over by their lofty speech and eloquent wisdom. People would side with one philosopher over the others and they would have quarrelling and debate. And the Christians were bringing the same thing into the church.

You can see this kind of quarreling very alive and well today and it's still creating all kinds of problems and division. In many cases it's this very thing that leads to church splits and new denominations. The church in Corinth was going down a road that if unchecked would have easily turned into a major church split and 4 distinct churches: The Church of Paul, The Church of Apollos, The Church of Cephas, And the Church of Christ.

Paul had heard about this division and he was very concerned. So he kind of lays into them...

Read 1 Corinthians 1:13-17.

*<sup>13</sup> Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? <sup>14</sup> I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup> so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. <sup>16</sup> (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) <sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*

So he points out the obvious to expose their foolishness. “Shouldn’t all of us be devoted to Christ alone?!” Later on in the book he’s going to point out that he, Apollos, and Peter are utterly unworthy of anyone’s devotion. They were just role players – doing what God called them to do – which was to point people to Jesus and help them grow mature in him. They were unworthy of anyone’s worship or devotion, only Christ was worthy. But the people were so drawn into preacher worship, so mesmerized by mere human agents. You can see he was relieved that he didn’t baptize very many of them so they couldn’t say they were baptized into his name. After seeing their propensity to worship preachers he didn’t want to give them any more reason to worship him.

He begins to point out that the only reason the church exists is to glorify Christ. The only reason anyone is saved is because Jesus was crucified for them. The only reason Paul came to them and spent 18 months with them was to point them to Jesus. The only name anyone is baptized into is the name of Jesus. The only one who is worthy of your adoration and praise is Jesus. The only one that any of us should follow and worship is Jesus.

So that’s the problem Paul deals with in the first four chapters of this book. And that’s a very timely caution for us as well. We have access to any preacher we want to listen to. We have high quality videos and audio messages and books, and all we have to do is look them up on our phones, buy their books, or tune in on the radio. It’s a huge, multi-billion dollar industry and it works really well because we’re drawn to popular preachers just like we’re drawn to our favorite celebrities.

But we have to take caution. It’s easy to become more focused on the preacher than on Christ. It’s easy to rely on their preaching or writing rather than on our

own communion with God. It's easy to read and study their books and neglect the Bible. It's easy to become indoctrinated by their theological bent rather than being transformed by the Spirit directly through the Word. It's easy to form camps that follow certain theological streams espoused by different spiritual leaders. And it's easy to divide. The church has been doing it for 2,000 years. Will we be any different? Will we take heed of Paul's warning to the Corinthian church?

I think the thing for us to do as we begin to study this first major problem is to examine our lives and think about who we're devoting ourselves to? Do you have a pet preacher that you eat up everything he or she has to say or write? Do you have a favorite pastor that you're addicted to? Do you become defensive when people go against what they have to say? Do you know more about their theology and teaching than you do about the Bible? It's an easy trap to get caught in. I've been caught in that trap.

There's nothing wrong with listening to a favorite preacher's sermons or reading their books. One of the gifts that God gives the church to equip the saints to do ministry is pastors and teachers. But God doesn't want us to become enthralled with them. Paul would have been one of the best preachers ever but he didn't want the Corinthians following him. God doesn't want us to be more devoted to a pastor's teaching than to the Bible itself. He doesn't want us to spend all our time listening to them instead of communing with Him. He doesn't want us to be indoctrinated by their teaching. He doesn't want the focus to be on them instead of on Christ. And all of us, I would wager, are prone to having that happen in our lives. Paul points out it's very foolish to treat preachers like that, it destroys our intimacy with Christ, and it's very destructive to the church.

So if you see celebrity preacher worship happening in your life, I encourage you to take some steps to cut it off right away. It's a form of idolatry. Diversify the pool of teachers who influence your life. Spend more time in prayer and Scripture than you do in books and listening to sermons. Cultivate your love for and relationship with Christ so that you look and act more like Jesus and not some preacher.