



Session 1 – 1Corinthians 1:1-17

THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH: GIFTED BUT DIVIDED

1. Verses 1-3 Paul's salutation – the Corinthians' calling

These verses follow the format which was normal for letters of the time, and given a Christian twist!

- **The name of the writer:** Paul identifies himself as an apostle. The Christians at Corinth are, it seems, questioning his authority and were ready to judge him (4:1-5), but he makes it clear that this is his God-given calling. In 9:1 & 15:8f, he will assert his credentials as an apostle: he is someone who has seen the risen Jesus.
- **The addressees:** Paul says three key things about the church in Corinth. 'Church' means a 'company of those called out'.
 - They are God's **holy people** – set apart to belong to him. Their calling is to **live holy lives** – to live as befits people who are devoted to God. Paul sees these Corinthians as they are **IN CHRIST**: saints because of what Christ has done (v.30) – their status is 'holy ones'.
 - They **belong together with believers everywhere**. They must remember that they are part of the universal church, and must resist any temptation to “do their own thing,” as some seem tempted to do.
 - They call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. For Christians, “Jesus is Lord” is the basic statement of faith.
- **Greeting:** Grace and peace. Everything we have is through God's grace – it is his bountiful free gift to us. And what he gives us is summed up in the Hebrew idea of *shalom* (which we translate *peace*). *Shalom* suggests wholeness, wellbeing in every part of life – especially in our relationship with God, because that is what Jesus made possible.

2. Verses 4-9 Paul's thanksgiving – the Corinthians' gifts

Paul gives thanks to God for what, in His grace, He has done in and for the Corinthians. Everything they have, and everything they are, comes from God's grace – his unmerited generosity.

- **God's gifts:** He has given them many gifts (v.5-7):
 - **gifts of speaking** – such as a message of wisdom, prophecy, preaching, teaching, evangelism, tongues (all of them mentioned in Ch.12);
 - **gifts of knowledge** – such as are mentioned in 12:8, 13:2, 14:6.

Later in the letter, Paul will criticise the Corinthians for misusing these gifts and using them selfishly or arrogantly; but they are real gifts, and he first thanks God for giving them. His readers too must focus on God, the **giver** of the gifts, not on themselves, the recipients.

- **God's faithfulness:** The Corinthians, like all Christians, are in this for the long haul – they are looking forward to the day of Jesus' return (**v.7b**) and must keep going until that great day. Look at the precious promise in **v.8** – God will keep them and sustain them; He will never give up on them, because He is faithful to His promise.
- **Note: the name JESUS CHRIST comes 8 times in these first 9 verses.** Paul has moved from what happened to the Corinthians in the past, through the sort of people they are in the present, to the hope they have for the future, with the Lord Jesus at the centre of every stage.

3. Verses 10-17 The divisiveness of idolising Christian teachers

Paul now starts to deal with the issues that have been troubling the Corinthian church.

- The first matter he wants to deal with is the **presence of divisions** within the church. He begs them to be united (**v.10**). He mentions **four factions (v.12)**.

'I, for one, am one of Paul's people.' 'I, for my part, am for Apollos.' 'I am a Peter person.' 'As for me, I belong to Christ'.

- We can only guess what these different groups stood for. What we can be sure of is that the four individuals mentioned would be horrified at the thought of people using their names for divisive arguments; Paul and Apollos, for example, are united as servants of the gospel of Jesus (3:5-8). Yet it seems that there is a power struggle between these groups within the church.

Paul makes it clear why it is so mistaken to have these divisions.

- Christ is being treated as if he were just another human being like Paul, Apollos and Peter (Kephass) – v.13 – note how Paul asks questions expecting the answer ‘no!’ *‘Has Christ been divided up? Impossible! And this church, since it is Christ’s body, cannot be divided up. Absurd slogans! Idolatry!’*
- It seems likely from what Paul says that there is some sort of personality cult – people are boasting about which leader baptised them, or possibly arguing about who is the best preacher. What is important is not the preacher, but the **message** which is preached – the good news of Christ crucified. What is important is not the minister of their baptism, but the significance of their baptism: in being baptised, the Christian declares their allegiance to Christ and takes hold of everything that he made possible by his dying for them on the cross (v.17). **‘Discussion of who baptized whom is beside the point (v.17a), so let’s get onto the real issue, which has to do with the nature of the gospel itself (v.17b).’**

‘Paul’s task is to proclaim the gospel – and not by manipulative rhetoric (‘wisdom of word’), sophisticated speech, cleverness in speaking. Clever rhetoric would nullify the cross and its transforming power by drawing attention away from divine grace to self-esteem, self-promotion and self-assertion’.

For homegroups

1. How many times is Jesus mentioned in **verses 1-9**? What does this say about the life of the church?
2. Paul describes believers as 'sanctified' and 'called to be holy' (**v.2**). How can we be 'made holy' (past tense) yet 'called to be holy' (present tense) at the same time?
3. 'Speech' and 'knowledge' (**v.5**) were areas of life in which the Corinthians struggled to be consistently Christ-like. How would you evaluate your own lifestyle in these two areas?
4. What do **verses 8-9** say about Christians being assured of their salvation? What is the basis for such hope?
5. Why is Paul so concerned that the Corinthian Church should be 'united in the same mind and judgement' (**v.10**)? What practical things can you do to help true Christian unity grow in your church? And with other churches?
6. 'Words of human wisdom' can 'empty the cross of its power' (**v.17**). Describe your own understanding of the worldly wisdom which is promoted by our culture. How is the church often led by what our modern culture demands?