



1 CORINTHIANS – FACT SHEET 1

Authorship:

Letter written by Paul (1:1), with customary greeting of the Apostle (see also Romans 1:1, 2 Cor 1:1, Galatians 1:1, Ephesians 1:1, Philipp 1:1, Colossians 1:1, 1 Tim 1:1, 2 Tim 1:1, Titus 1:1). The letter was written by the Apostle from Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8), probably on his third missionary journey, as the first visit to Ephesus would have been much too near his founding Corinthian visit for such developments within the church.

Background:

Corinth was a thriving business centre, attracting folk from all over the Graeco-Roman empire. Jews established a synagogue there (Acts 18:4); indeed the first fellow Jews Paul befriended had re-located to Corinth after being excluded from Rome (Acts 18:2). The city was renowned for its licentiousness and go-getting, 'live life to the full' culture. Many temples could be found there, including the temple to the goddess Aphrodite (goddess of sex) and Apollo, the god of the arts and poetry; which also promoted and encouraged homosexuality.

The Apostle came to Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18) and stayed there for 18 months in his founding visit (Acts 18:11). As a Roman province, the Greek city had headed up the rebellion against the Roman occupancy; and so was sacked in 146BC; however, under Caesar, who recognised its strategic position and importance, in 46BC it became the thriving business and cultural centre that the Apostle Paul found in AD51.

Message & Audience:

Within such a culture that promoted 'getting ahead' and hedonism (pleasure seeking); these characteristics were to be reflected within the early Corinthian congregation that Paul established. Personalities were important (1:10-12), competition as to the most important spiritual gifts prevailed (Chapter 12), business influence pervaded relationships, some believers using their influence to take legal action against other brothers and sisters (6:1-8), sexual immorality had a foothold (5:1-5). With a Pastor's heart, the Apostle firmly, yet sensitively deals with these issues. The occasion for such a letter being his natural pastor's heart, prompted by news from 'Chloe's household' (1:11); plus a letter he had received from the church (7:1), requesting clarification on such matters as marriage and food sacrificed to idols.

Whilst there are many and various themes and subjects dealt with; the overriding message from the Apostle, is that he desires that they see just who they are 'in Christ' and understand their responsibility to behave in a manner that honours their Lord (1:2), and that **their calling is a HOLY one**. They have been set apart for His work, not only called to be saved, but also to serve. Equally, the competitive spirit that had been brought into the church, was devaluing certain gifts and promoting others. The Corinthians would need to know that **their strength was in their DIVERSITY** (1:5-7, Chapter 12). Despite their differing emphasis, their focus should not be on these differences, but rather on Christ and ultimately His love (8:1) which 'builds up'. For a model of love; the Apostle pens the most famous chapter 13; which if adopted as the platform of service, will ensure unity and an all-inclusive fellowship of service to Him; **their unity being in LOVE**.

Chapter 1:1-17:

The Apostle has a lot of difficult things to say to the Corinthian church. It would have been easy for him to 'plough' straight in to the 'areas for improvement' section. However, Paul is keen to let the Corinthians understand their position 'in Christ' first. It is so easy for even God's people, to focus on the 'negative' and the 'not so good' – the Apostle demonstrates the importance of viewing one another as our Heavenly Father does, 'In Christ' (1:2). These first 17 verses can be considered under two headers:

Firstly: We are called by GRACE: 1-9:

Without these first 9 verses, 1 Corinthians would be a damning indictment on the Corinthian church. Yet Paul sets out from the outset, the privileges of the church:

- They are called – vs2
- They are God's Church (not Paul's or anyone else's) – vs2
- They have been set apart – vs2
- Are gifted in speech and knowledge – vs5
- Have shown evidence of transformation – vs6
- As a church, collectively, lack no gift – vs7

All of this is by the grace of God (vs 3 & 4); who will ensure that He keeps them 'until the end' (vs 8) because He is faithful (vs 9).

Second: We are called to UNITY: 10-17:

Although a beautiful reminder of their secured position; the church is not there yet, as 'work in progress', there is work to do. Since Paul founded the church, then carried on with his missionary journeys; the church had grown and had come under the teaching of various folk. Whilst the teaching of Paul, Apollos and Peter would have been sound; with the tendency for 'favourite' personalities, folk in the church had started to form cliques; some 'preferring' Paul, others Apollos, still others Peter (vs 12).

Thus Paul's first appeal is for 'agreement', yet not a frail human pact, but rather an agreement 'in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ' (vs10). The Apostle also appeals to them as new found family, as 'brothers' (mentioned 39 times in this letter – far more than in any other of the Apostle's). It is also interesting to note that a fourth group had emerged we can call the 'Christ group' (vs 12). These 'four' groups may well have had varying characteristics:

- Paul group – many would have undying loyalty to the Apostle. For many he was their spiritual 'father' (4:15). He came with 'fear and trembling' (2:3) and would have formed close friendships during those early conversions;
- Apollos would have greatly appealed to the intellectual amongst the Corinthians (Acts 18:24-28). Comparisons would have been made between him and the Apostle;
- Peter from 'head office', probably appealed to those converted from Judaism. They would have appreciated the more 'sober' approach of Peter in comparison to the 'free spirits' of converted Corinthians;
- In rejection of all human authority; against the Corinthian culture of 'people promotion', a 'Christ' group may have emerged claiming 'inner knowledge or Gnosis. This 'spiritually elite' group would have stood against order and predictability; preferring the more elaborate and visible gifts and experiences.

Paul's response to these four groups is for them to see their unity in their one Lord, Jesus Christ; thus the Apostle appeals for unity on three fronts:

- The WHOLENESS of Christ – Christ is not divided, neither should we be – vs 13
- The CROSS of Christ – Christ has been crucified for them, He is the only way - our agreement is in Him – vs13
- The LORDSHIP of Christ – the people were not baptised *into* (life signed over to) Paul or any other man – but Christ.

Ultimately, it is the power of the Cross that is to be our focus (vs 17).

For further study:

Divisions and disagreements can often be about trivial things that can only serve to detract God's people from their true focus of serving Christ – look up the following passages and think about the causes of such and how we should approach them: Romans 16:17, 2 Tim 2:23, Titus 3:9

Further Reading/Bibliography:

The Holy Bible, 1 Corinthians (Morris, Tyndale), 1 Corinthians (Prior, IVP), 1 Corinthians (Thiselton, Eerdmans).

"Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your Word"
Psalm 119:18