

# 1 CORINTHIANS

Dealing with Challenges from  
Within and Without

# Introduction

- **Date of writing:** AD 54, three years after he founded the church during his 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey (Acts 15:36-18:22)



# Introduction

- **Purpose for writing:** In AD 54, while in Ephesus, Paul received news about problems in the church from two sources:
  - A letter sent from members (7:1)
  - Verbal information given to Paul from the household of Chloe (1:11; cf. 5:1)
- **The many problems in the Corinthian church** stem from allowing the cultural values and practices of Greco-Roman society to infiltrate the church that some believers never abandoned

# Introduction

- **Problems include**, but not limited to, opinions on what is superior rhetorical skills, divisions based on personalities, sexual immorality, social class separations, ranking of spiritual gifts, and inappropriate church worship meetings
- **Key Themes can be divided into two main areas:**
  - Divisions and quarrels within the congregation
  - Infiltration of secular non-Christian values into the church

# Church Divisions

- A report from Chloe's household tips off Paul of quarrels
- <sup>10</sup>I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. <sup>11</sup>My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you (1:10-11)
- There were four factions—Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and Christ
- <sup>12</sup>What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ" (1:12)

# The Root of Church Divisions

- Archaeological evidence reveals inscriptions publicized the generosity of benefactors as a means of promoting their reputation
- Underlying the problem was the self-promoting effort of those “patrons”—wealthy, influential individuals—who exacerbated the competing alliances (1:12)
- It was likely that the minority of social elite in the church were behind a large percentage of the problems

# The Root of Church Divisions

- Paul exposes the arrogance and immaturity of those people, who instigated disunity:
- <sup>8</sup>Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings—and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we also might become kings with you! (4:8)

# The Root of Church Divisions

- They viewed the apostles as working class laborers in 4:12-13
- <sup>12</sup>We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; <sup>13</sup>when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment (4:12-13)
- Such people who claimed to be spiritually mature actually relied on “worldly wisdom” (Gnosticism) as opposed to the gospel
- Paul insists that if the gospel is used manipulatively for self-promotion, the cross of Christ becomes nullified (1:17)

# The Root Problem of Divisions

- <sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power (1:17)
- To those whose values are those of the wisdom of the world the cross is folly
- <sup>18</sup> For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1:18).
- God destroys worldly wisdom:
- <sup>19</sup> For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate” (1:19; cf. Isa 29:14)

# The Root Problem of Divisions

- Believers need to view themselves in terms of the gospel
- <sup>26</sup> Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. <sup>28</sup> God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are (1:26-28)

# The Impact on Church Leadership and Unity

- An identity crisis has grave impact on church leadership
- Paul admits that he didn't possess the rhetorical skills of professional orators in proclaiming the gospel:
- **2** And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. **2** For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. **3** I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. **4** My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power. **5** so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power (2:1-5)

# The Role of Apostles and Ministers

- Church leadership requires spiritual maturity:
- **3** Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup>I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. <sup>3</sup>You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? <sup>4</sup>For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere human beings? (3:1-4)

# The Role of Apostles and Ministers

- In response to the “personality-centred” politics, Paul gives instruction on how to view apostles or ministers
- Guard against too high a view of apostles and ministers:
- <sup>5</sup>What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task (3:5)
- It is God, not ministers, who gives life and growth to the church:
- <sup>6</sup>I planted the seed. Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow (3:6)

# The Role of Apostles and Ministers

- Avoid too low a view of apostles and ministers:
- They provide the conditions of “planting” and “watering” through which God chooses to give growth:
- <sup>6</sup>I planted the seed. Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. <sup>7</sup>So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. <sup>8</sup>The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. <sup>9</sup>For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building (3:6-9)

# The Role of Apostles and Ministers

- Christian ministry is shared, although each minister has a distinctive role or task:
- <sup>9</sup>For we are God's fellow-workers [*theou ... synergoi*] (3:9)
- A worker is to be evaluated based on his or her faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ:
- **4** So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. <sup>2</sup>Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful (4:1-2)

# Conclusions

- An identity crisis—between the wisdom of the world and the word of the cross—lies at the heart of church struggles
- Paul urges Christians to center our identity on the Cross of Jesus
- Christians must filter out “worldly wisdom” from influencing the church
- This letter is about the Christian’s need to view every aspect of life through the lens of the gospel.

# Application Pointers

- Christian identity must be defined by the theology of the cross, not worldly wisdom, which is obsessed with status and self-promotion
- All truth is God's truth: the use of secular management or business tools is helpful
- Paul uses architectural and agricultural metaphors in describing the growth of the church (3:6-15)

# Application Pointers

- In using secular business and management tools, leaders must depend on the Holy Spirit and the guidance of Holy Scripture to focus on gospel expansion
- In using secular business and management tools, leaders must be discerning in prioritizing the Bible and filter all secular principles and practices through the Bible
- Secular elements not consistent with biblical teaching must be avoided