

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut
Winter, 2008

1 Corinthians

I. 1 Corinthians 1:1-2:16
Divisions at Corinth: Spirit and Wisdom

In reading any of Paul's letters, it is useful to take a moment to attend to what Paul says in his initial greetings (1:1-3). Paul introduces himself, as "an apostle of Christ Jesus," hinting at an issue in his relationship with his Corinthian community, what his status was and what it meant to be an "apostle" of Christ. We shall hear more about these issues in this and the next session of our study.

Paul goes on to greet his congregation as those who have been "sanctified in Christ Jesus." In this seemingly innocuous phrase Paul at once celebrates what he believes has taken place in Corinth. His preaching and the Corinthians acceptance of it has led to a change in their status. Once they were "profane" Gentiles, outside the orbit of a relationship with God. Now they stand in such a relationship and it is worth celebrating. It may be, however, that one of the problems that Paul is confronting in this community is an excessive celebration of person spiritual experience and relationship with God. His next phrase, "called to be saints" introduces a hint that there remains an important element of moral responsibility in his gospel message to the Corinthians. The verse summarizes much of the argument of the whole text: "Yes," says Paul, "something significant has happened to you in your encounter with Christ, but, No, you are not perfect. You are called to be something special. Act on that calling!"

Paul often offers a little prayer of thanks at the beginning of his letters, imitating a custom in contemporary Greek letter writing. In this thanksgiving (1:4-9) he continues to develop the balance that he struck in the greeting. The Corinthians have been blessed, "enriched," with all sorts of "speech and knowledge." They have learned and experienced something very special, and have received "spiritual gifts." With that prayer of thanks, comes a prayer for "strengthening" (1:9).

After the prayer comes some indication of the problem on the table (1:10-16). The community is apparently divided, with different factions

pledging allegiance to one or another preacher and teacher (including Christ! v. 12). Information about these divisions has apparently been brought to Paul by “Chloe’s people” (v. 11), perhaps slaves or freedmen of a well-to-do woman in Corinth.

In response to these divisions in Corinth, Paul issues a fundamental challenge: Think about Christ crucified. That is where true wisdom resides (1:18-25). Paul recognizes that what he is saying, that the touchstone of enlightenment is the corpse of condemned criminal, is likely to be rejected and derided (1:23), but he goes ahead and makes that claim. The cross of Christ is somehow the criterion by which other claims to meaning and value are to be judged.

From such a dramatic challenge Paul returns to the concrete situation of his audience (1:26-31). Some, but certainly not all, are people of means or status. His reference to issues of social status may point to some of the factors that caused divisions in the community.

Paul makes his fundamental moves in the first chapter, challenging his audience to think about who they are in the light of their belief in Christ. In his next chapter (2:1-16), Paul develops these thoughts in a positive way, claiming that Christ crucified is indeed the “wisdom of God,” hidden from all eternity (2:7), that in Christ something is revealed that had long been hidden (2:9). The strong contrast between divine revelation and human expectation hints at an issue that Paul will address more concretely in later chapters, how a community of believers relates to a world with very different expectations and assumptions.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Are there divisions in the congregation of which you are a part? What is at their roots?

2. What do you make of Paul's claim that the cross of Christ is in some fashion or other a basic criterion of meaning and truth?

3. How would you analyze the ways in which your Church community divides along lines of status or wealth? Are such divisions a major element in the life of the community?

4. Do we share Paul's perspective that there is a dramatic difference between "revelation" and the world that we confront every day? What is the relationship between Christ and culture?

For further study:

Sigurd Grindheim, "Wisdom for the Perfect: Paul's Challenge to the Corinthian Church (1 Corinthians 2:6-16)," *JBL* 121 (2002) 689-709 or <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=22&hid=105&sid=9cb1b54a-ce84-4fbc-a41e-e2a3d31d2806%40sessionmgr109>

Lawrence L. Welborn, "First Corinthians 1-4 and Ancient Politics," in idem, *Politics and Rhetoric in the Corinthian Epistles* (Macon: Macon University Press, 1997) 1-42, revised from *JBL* 106 (1987) 85-111

Additional suggestion:

Nils A. Dahl, "Paul and the church at Corinth according to 1 Cor 1:10-4:21," in W. R. Farmer, C.F.D. Moule, and R.R. Niebuhr, eds., *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), repr. in *Studies in Paul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977).