

1 Corinthians

Background and 1:1–17

Introduce

Have you ever watched a Michigan football game with friends who are rooting for the other team? How have you felt when your friends cheer at a big play that goes against Michigan?

We're going to look tonight at how the church in Corinth was experiencing problems because of some misguided allegiances and how they were acting like a crowd cheering for different teams.

Investigate

Background [Look for Corinth in your Bible maps; explain this background to the group]

The city of Corinth

- Major industrial center just between the Aegean and the Ionian seas and just south of Athens.
- A very wealthy city because of trade and because of the temple of Aphrodite which boasted more than 1000 female prostitutes. People would use the expression "To live like a Corinthian" to describe a lifestyle of sexual immorality.
- It was "at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world." (Gordon Fee, NICNT, 3)

The Church in Corinth and this First Epistle to the Corinthians

- A diverse church of Jews and Gentiles; slave and free. Gentiles were the majority.
- A "former letter" (1 Cor 5:9 now lost) was sent by Paul from Ephesus. He has received reports about the church (1:11) and may have received a delegation from the church (16:17) with questions that he addresses in this book (cf. 7:1). He may have visited the church in what he describes as his "painful visit" (2 Cor 2:1) after hearing more unfavorable reports after the writing of this letter. He wrote a "sorrowful letter" when he failed to respond to this letter. Later, however, he received an encouraging report from Titus in Macedonia and wrote 2 Corinthians in response. Finally he spent a winter there before heading to Jerusalem to deliver aid to the Palestinian Christians (Acts 20:2-3). So Paul wrote to the church four times, two letters which are lost.
- Paul wrote this on his third missionary journey while in Ephesus, around A.D. 55/56.
- "Although they were the Christian church in Corinth, an inordinate amount of Corinth was yet in them, emerging in a number of attitudes and behaviors that required radical surgery without killing the patient. This is what 1 Corinthians attempts to do." (Fee, 4)

Explore the Passage

[Read the entire passage before looking at individual sections so that you have an overall context.]

1:1-3

- How does Paul identify himself and how does he describe the people of the church in Corinth?
- How does this greeting give a foundation for what Paul is attempting to do in this book?
[Think about the many problems he will address and how they might respond]

1:4-9

- What is Paul thankful for? How is the grace of God in Christ demonstrated in their lives?
- Who is at the center of Paul's thanksgiving? [*Christ, not the church*] How does Paul make Christ the center of the source of their spiritual life? Give examples from the text.
- Why is this focus on God's essential role in the lives of these believers important in light of the rebuke that Paul is about to give? [*Their allegiance to individual teachers which has led to disunity in the church makes no sense in light of everything they have been given together in Christ.*]

1:10-17

- What is Paul appealing for in this section? What has been reported to him by Chloe's people? What is the source of quarreling?
- Why do you think these believers would rally around individual teachers? What is especially questionable about the last group that claims "I follow Christ"?
- How can we find ourselves lifting our allegiance to a particular view or person over our essential unity in Christ? Give some examples.
- What is Paul's response to these misguided allegiances? What is the answer to every one of these questions? Why does Paul give this extended argument about baptism?
- How does Paul begin to set up the absurdity of putting allegiance in him instead of Christ at the end of this section?
- Think about the nature of philosophical debate in the Greek world. Why does Paul emphasize that his preaching was without eloquent wisdom? Why would an attempt by Paul to preach with eloquence and wisdom empty the cross of Christ of its power?

Discover the Big Idea

What basis does Paul give for unity in mind and judgment throughout the first part of this chapter? What is the danger of false allegiances within the church?

Summary: Our mutual calling in Christ and the enrichment and gifting we have received from Christ should motivate us to find agreement in the cross of Christ rather than divide us over misguided allegiances.

Respond

- What are some potential misguided allegiances you feel you may have now or may have had in the past? What has this done to your relationships with other believers who may have different allegiances?
- How do we balance acceptable disagreements with a focus on our unity in Christ?
- What is it in the depths of your heart that causes you to look to a particular view or person to formulate your spiritual identity rather than looking primarily to Christ? [*Make sure to hit on the self focus or idolatry that is at the heart of misguided allegiances—the desire to lift our own wisdom and position rather than lifting up Christ who is the source of our spiritual life.*]
- What do you learn about Christ and your relationship to Him in this passage that causes you to desire to lift Him up above every other potential allegiance?