

1 Corinthians 1:10**PREFACE (PASSAGE)**

For the last few weeks we have been looking at Paul's thanksgiving to God for the many gifts—or graces—He has entrusted to the Corinthian church. Paul, in v6, says that these gifts confirm that his "testimony," his gospel teaching in their midst, did indeed find a home in these individuals. D. A. Carson refers to this as "empirical evidence of their sanctification."

Now we turn the page to the next section, vv10-12, which Carson titles, "empirical evidence of what is *missing* in their sanctification"—principally, the divisions or factions in their assembly, and their quarreling with each other. Both of which could be reduced down to an attitude and spirit of 'I'm right and you're wrong.' But there is something far deeper going on here.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-12.

To properly interpret and understand the first four chapters of the Corinthian letter we must understand some key points:

- The "divisions" and "quarrels" in the church were less *the* problem than *symptoms* of the problem. Divisions and factions within any church are unhealthy and counterproductive, but more important is *why they are there*.
- A clue to the root problem causing this division in Corinth is revealed by Paul's extraordinary number of references, or uses of from v1: 18 to 2: 16 and beyond, to the "wisdom" word group. Back in our second session, as we were surveying the letter as a whole, I pointed out that from v1: 18 to v2: 14 Paul refers to "wisdom" or "foolishness" *27 times*. In the context of the entire NT this is an astonishing number of uses of an otherwise infrequent word group.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:20.**Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.**

- Along with the emphasis on wisdom language (Greek *sophia* or *sophos*) these chapters also include repeated references to the Corinthians "boasting" and being "puffed up."

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-23.

The question then remains: What does all this add up to? What was really going on in the Corinthian church? What was causing these divisions? What is the root of the problem? For the answer we turn to the commentator Gordon Fee, from whom we get this interpretation.

Fee: Although the answer to this is somewhat speculative, nonetheless some good guesses can be made. Interpreters commonly see the emphasis on wisdom as stemming from the Corinthian believers' response to the ministry of Apollos, either from his content or his style, or perhaps both. This has much to commend it and may well be so. But since very little in the church in Corinth, as seen in this letter, reflects a Jewish background, it seems better to see the problem as stemming from

Hellenistic influences. In this case, therefore, it is possible that the key lies with the phenomenon in the Hellenistic [i.e., Greek] world of the itinerant philosopher, many of whom were sophists [Greek teachers known for their clever, specious arguments]—more concerned with polished oration than with significant content. The coming and going in turn of Paul, Apollos, and Peter (if indeed he had visited the church), and especially some marked contrasts in style and content among them, had perhaps led the Corinthians themselves to begin to think of their new-found faith as an expression of *sophia* [wisdom]— the divine *sophia*, to be sure, but *sophia* nonetheless.

Fee continues,

Within this kind of context they were quarreling over their leaders as teachers of wisdom, boasting in one or the other, and judging them from this merely human perspective, from which perspective neither Paul nor his gospel comes off very well. The message of a crucified Messiah, preached by an apostle who lived in considerable weakness, is hardly designed to impress the ‘wise,’ as they now considered themselves. In any case—and this is the crucial item for these chapters—the greater issue for Paul is not the division itself; that is merely a symptom. The greater issue is the threat posed to the gospel, and along with that to the nature of the church and its apostolic ministry. Thus, in a more profound way than is sometimes recognized, this opening issue is the most crucial in the letter, not because their ‘quarrels’ were the most significant problem in the church, but because the nature of this particular strife had as its root cause a false theology, in which they had exchanged the theology of the cross for an ingenuous triumphalism that went beyond, or excluded, the cross.

Note: As usual, this is not the only interpretation of the text. This is, however, the one that in my opinion does the best job of explaining the reason for Paul’s emphases in the ensuing verses and chapters. Or it may be that Fee is just one of the rare few willing to dig beneath the surface. Some commentators simply deal with the church’s divisions, not bothering to root out their cause. If Paul addressed this in one or two verses, then moved onto something else, I could understand that. But Paul works on this for many verses throughout *multiple* chapters. That makes it important to him—and to us.

It makes perfect sense that in the sophisticated, cosmopolitan milieu of Corinth the church members would become enamored with personalities, with eloquence, with impressive yet specious rhetoric. And in that multicultural, multi-religion environment so heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, it would be easy for them to associate the teaching of these various church leaders with the Greek concept of philosophical wisdom, or *sophia*.

But God says through the prophet Isaiah, quoted by Paul in v19, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.”

For the spiritual health of the church of God in Christ today I can think of no more important passage than this, no more important verse than v10. What Paul speaks to here is *critical* to the church: in disunity the church collapses; in unity it thrives. This is why it is imperative that we, first, understand what the word is saying here and, second, apply that truth to both our church and our individual lives.

v10 (PREFACE)

Never before in the history of man has it been so easy, so convenient to listen to disparate voices, disparate and potentially conflicting theologies. Certainly in the first century that voice had to *physically* travel to where you were for you to hear it. Paul had to commit to a long and arduous, sometimes treacherous journey to speak the gospel to the Corinthians.

Even as recent as 100 years ago, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, it remained much the same. There was no television or even commercially available radios. Moving pictures were still in their infancy, and although they were plentiful and popular, they remained silent. There were, of course, books and magazines, but one would be hard-pressed to discover and read something truly controversial or scandalous.

Today all these restrictions have been eliminated. No matter where we are—even walking down the street—we can listen to myriad voices from around the world. At a touch or a click we can listen to and absorb unrestricted philosophies, religions and fanciful opinions.

As remarkable as this is, this is not necessarily cause for rejoicing. Because access is easier and restrictions have been eliminated—not just technologically, but morally—it is easier to take in bad doctrine, heresy, fantasy—garbage. Cults of personality, of winsome rhetoric, of spurious doctrine have become even more numerous and diverse. And all available at our fingertips. Itinerant speakers are no longer necessary; any idiot can sit in his or her basement and reach the world.

This ease of access places a heavier, more critical burden on each individual to not believe everything one hears. It means that every follower of Christ must be even more diligent to insure that everything taken in is judged against the eternal and unchanging standard of God's word. The words coming from any individual—no matter how eloquent, attractive, popular or credentialed—must be weighed against God's holy word.

v10

So let us see how Paul begins to address this challenging situation. Verse 10 is only the opening salvo of a campaign that he will prosecute for almost one quarter of the letter. [And because of the constraints of time, we will just begin our look at v10 in this session, returning to it in our next before we press on into the passage.](#)

Now I exhort you, brethren...

Paul opens his argument with both a *pastoral* tone, emphasizing his appeal to family members, and with a more authoritative, apostolic tone, calling upon the full authority of "our Lord Jesus Christ."

First, as a pastor, he addresses them with the Greek is *adelphos*, literally the masculine "brothers" or "brethren." The *new NIV* (2011) translates this "brothers and sisters"—good interpretation; poor *translation*. We already have evidence in this immediate passage (v11) of the prominence of certain women in the Corinthian church. We also have evidence that Paul, at least in his thinking, included women in his reference to "brethren"; in his letter to the Philippians he uses *adelphos*, and then immediately refers to two important women in the church.

Read Philippians 4:1-3.

There is one more reason for Paul to exhort them as “brethren.” They are not just *his* brethren, but in a letter to a church that is in the process of breaking up into factions, he wants to stress their family relationship *to each other*.

by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ

We have already shown that Paul does not waste words—that he says what he means and he means what he says. This is the fifth time in ten verses that Paul has employed the full title “Lord Jesus Christ” or “Jesus Christ our Lord.” This serves two purposes: to keep the preeminence and authority of Christ before the church, and to emphasize *his* (Paul’s) apostolic authority in that appellation.

He calls upon that authority in this moment to “exhort” them.

exhort^{nasb}, **appeal**^{niv, esv}, **beseech**^{kjv}, **plead**^{nkjv} = *parakaleo* = from <G3844> (para) and <G2564> (kaleo); to call near, i.e. invite, invoke (by imploration, hortation or consolation) :- **beseech**, **call for**, (be of good) comfort, desire, (give) exhort (-ation), entreat, pray.

that you all agree

Here the KJVs are the most literal in their translation: “that you all speak the same thing.”

Necessary in understanding what Paul means by the positive, “that you all agree,” is what he says in the negative: “that there be no divisions among you.” But I want to close this session by dwelling for a moment on what is meant by, in the Greek, *to auto legete pantes*: “that the same thing ye may all say.”

This phrase for me immediately brings to mind a lasting, haunting image from the opening ceremonies of the 2008 summer Olympics in the People’s Republic of China. The field was covered by hundreds (perhaps thousands) of drummers—all perfectly, absolutely, *surgically* aligned, moving their arms in *precise* unison. It was not marvelous, it was not impressive; it was *creepy*. It served as a perfect illustration of the hideous nature of communism, of socialism.

This is not at all what Paul means by exhorting the Corinthians to “all agree.” He does not want creepy, unnatural *uniformity*, but *unity*. Pastor Alistair Begg likens the former to a person standing up in the assembly and declaring, “Broccoli is my favorite vegetable,” followed by the person next to the first standing up and declaring, “Broccoli is *my* favorite vegetable, too.”

Where we will leave it this week is to establish that God does not care that we all agree on our vegetables—or the type of music played in a worship service, or what color tie one wears to church. God *does* care very much that every assembly agree on what they believe—and declare—about His Son Jesus Christ.