

Commentary

1-3 Paul uses the traditional letter format of 'From X, to Y, Greeting', but fills out each bit with something significant for his bigger themes:

- From: Paul, described as 'the official delegate of the Messiah', who holds this office 'by the will of God'. This 'heavy' introduction to Paul's apostolic authority implies that the reader, past and present, ought to listen carefully! Sosthenes is a local boy (cf Acts 18:17).
- To: The Church of God (and NB it's God's, rather than belonging to any particular individual) who are 'made *holy* in Christ Jesus, called to be *holy*' (lit): at the heart of all the problems in Corinth is a lack of true holiness (and what this actually looks like will need to be defined in the letter, in issue after issue). And it is also to all Christians everywhere (not just gathered in Corinth) implying links far wider than the current splintering besetting the church (10f).

4-9 Paul's thanksgiving has two themes:

- God has generously given so much to the Corinthian Christians that they lack no spiritual gift (cf repeated 'every', 'all', 'not lacking any'). Of course, there is more needed than just 'speech' and 'knowledge', and Paul will make the point about their lack of love (cf 8:1; 13:1-3). And of course, there is also the danger that their giftedness could lead to arrogance, as it indeed it has (cf 4:8f; 8:1-3 etc). But at this stage, Paul's point is entirely God-centred: nearly every verb here emphasises that God has made this church what it is and given to this church what it has. It is God himself that they are to thank, and for so much.
- The one thing that the Corinthian Christians are to do is to 'wait'. So right at the start of this letter, Paul is making the point that being a Christian is about the long haul 'to the end', and not about having arrived. 'God is faithful' to sustain them, since his call (2, 8) focuses on sharing fellowship with Jesus on the day he returns.

10-17 Here is the start of the letter proper as Paul begins to respond to news that has been delivered to him. Our studies in chapters 1-4 are really all about the first of a series of issues (and the wrong thinking that lies behind it all): the church is dividing behind individual leaders.

We can perhaps reconstruct something of what is going on. We know about Apollos, a Jew who needed others to 'show him the way of God more accurately', from Acts 18:24-28. We're told he was a powerful speaker, and perhaps was being positively contrasted to Paul's less spectacular approach (2:3-4). Cephas, or Peter, (and his wife 9:5) had also visited Corinth and perhaps unsettled the Christians as to whether Paul was fully an apostle (since he was neither a disciple of

the historical Jesus, nor a first witness of his resurrection). And it appears thirdly, that there were some other local leader(s) who were taking the church in a different direction (3:10, 18; 4:18-19), with their own loyal following in danger of becoming arrogant (4:6). The division seems to be about personalities, not doctrine ... Christians separated by celebrity cult, pride, jealousy and boastfulness.

Paul's reply is that all Christians belong to Christ: 'you are God's field' (3:9), 'you are God's temple' (3:16), 'you are the body of Christ' (12:27). There may have been several house churches in Corinth, but doubtless God says to himself 'I have only one church' (cf 2).

- 13 Paul asks three questions which each invites a 'No! that would be daft!'
- is Christ divided? (or 'is there more than one Christ?' [J.B.Phillips])
 - was Paul crucified for you? (ie do you trust one of us to save you?)
 - were you baptised in the name of Paul? (with a higher allegiance to him, than to your union with Christ cf Rom 6:2-11).

What they were doing was undermining the essentials of the gospel, denying that there is only one Christ who was crucified for us and into whose name we've been baptised. The person of Christ, the cross of Christ and the name of Christ are at stake when the church divides.

- 14-17 Paul downplays not baptism, but the baptiser. Acts 18 makes it clear that 'many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptised' (Acts 18:8). But Paul asks: what does the person doing the baptising matter? It's not 'by whom' but 'into whom' that matters.

- 17 anticipates 1:18-2:5. The point here is Paul's preaching was (a) evangelistic, not sacramental; (b) the cross, not worldly wisdom; and (c) confident in God's power, rather than rhetorical tricks.

John Stott (in *Calling Christian Leaders*) helpfully notes a similar theme in each paragraph: the painful tension between 'the already' and 'the not yet':

- the church is made holy (since we are 'sanctified' when we become Christians), yet it is still sinful and so must be called to be holy.
- the church lacks nothing and is enriched with every spiritual gift needed, yet it is still defective, eagerly awaiting the return of Christ.
- the church is united (with 'all those who in every place call on the name of Jesus': the same call, the same Lord, the same salvation), yet it is still divided and needs to be told to renounce personality cults.

By holding together 'the already' and 'the not yet', we can acknowledge both

- we are not perfectionists who dream of developing a perfect church on earth; we are right to seek the purity of the church, but we are wrong to imagine we will attain it before Christ returns.
- we are not defeatists who shrug our shoulders at all kinds of sin and error in the church; we are right to acknowledge the reality of such things, but we are wrong to tolerate them as if they don't matter.

Launching question

What kinds of secondary issues do churches sometimes divide over?
Why do you think these issues don't matter?
If the issue doesn't matter, does the division matter?

The story so far ...

READ Acts 18:1-17

Describe this church in Corinth by the time Paul left it: what was its DNA?
2-3 years later, Paul's had a letter from them and heard news; he writes ...
READ 1 Corinthians 1:1-17

Looking closer

What's Paul heard? What's the problem?
How are the divisions becoming obvious?
The divisions seem to be about personalities, not doctrine ... how does this kind of thing happen in church circles?
Give a flavour of what you think the 'quarrelling' (11) might be about.

Looking again at 17, why does Paul say these divisions matter?
Given that Acts 18 tells us that Paul did baptise those who believed, why is so dismissive in 14-16?
What does Paul emphasise (instead of individuals)? *more than one answer*
What does he think his ministry is about, and not about (in 17)?
What is Paul playing down in this paragraph (in contrast to the Corinthians)?

Re-READ 1:1-3

How does Paul describe himself?
How does Paul describe those to whom he's writing?
From what we've seen so far, why does he begin like this?
What is dangerous in speaking about Emmanuel as 'my / our church'?

Re-READ 1:4-9

What does Paul thank God for in this divided church? Why?
What is the danger for a church that thinks it has everything/lacks nothing?
If this church has everything/lacks nothing, what are they waiting for?!
How might this paragraph impact on their personality-cult-divisions?

Thinking it through

What dangers are there for any church, from what we've seen here?
What dangers are there for a church that thinks it's great?
What should a church emphasise?

What has struck you as possibly very applicable to Emmanuel?
Are there things we need to do to avoid some of the problems in Corinth?

Summary

Corinth was New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas all rolled into one. It was the Roman Empire's second city, and a centre for commerce, popular culture, mishmash-religion and pleasure. Paul's trip there in Acts 18:1-17 grew a church in the midst of hostility and inter-community tension. Within 2-3 years, Paul writes this letter responding to news brought by Chloe (1:11) and to issues raised in a letter they'd written to him (7:1).

In ch 1-4, as Paul confronts divisions in the church, look out for themes of ...

- worldly ways of thinking (eg exalting individual leaders, or their polished public speaking, stressing form over content);
 - over-realised eschatology (ie bringing into the present some of the blessings God promises us for heaven), producing a triumphalism where individuals have an inflated view of their own maturity;
 - what is authentic Christian ministry (and defending Paul's own ministry).
- Ch 1-4 is really a pastoral sermon on the theme of **true wisdom and false**.

The story so far ...

Paul had stayed in Corinth originally for 18 months (Acts 18:11), already written a (now lost) letter to them (5:9), and received a letter from them (7:1). Now he's received more news from people in the household of a woman named Chloe about the state of the church (1:11). So this is clearly a church he knows well. But although he proceeds through a checklist of their issues (so making the letter very particular to one local setting), this is the only letter in which Paul addresses all Christian everywhere as well as a local church (1:2). Perhaps the array of problems besetting the Corinthian church included those that every congregation will face some time or other.

Theme Sentence

Despite all God has given them, the Corinthian church is tragically divided.

Ideas for application

- any church belongs to God, so we shouldn't speak about 'our church'.
- God has made each local congregation what it is, giving it all it needs: we should enjoy his generosity without complaining or boasting.
- if a congregation divides according to personality, that has the most serious theological implications.
- any church / church minister needs to ask if they are preaching the gospel, not how many people are following them.