

## **United in Christ: Meeting the Challenges of Diversity Studies in 1 Corinthians**

**Intro:** Last year we studied together several of the epistles of Paul—his two letters to the Thessalonians, and his letter to Timothy. In each of them we saw important themes that have lasting value for the church.

**In the first part of this year I want us to look at another epistle of Paul—his first letter to the Corinthians. This letter too has a very unique practical value as well. It is especially useful to us in a time when there is so much diversity in our culture. It speaks to the need to strive for unity in Christ in the face of diverse backgrounds, ideologies, and points of view. It will therefore help guide us also through the choppy waters of multi-culturalism in our own time.**

**Before we start looking at the text it might be helpful to prepare ourselves by learning a little about Corinth as a city, how the church was established there, and the things that led Paul to write his letter. With this background in mind, what Paul says will make more sense for us; and it will enable us to better bridge the gap as we seek to apply Paul’s message in our own culture.**

### **The diversity of Corinth in the time of Paul**

#### ***A Roman city***

Corinth was razed by the Romans in 146 BC and its inhabitants were sold into slavery. Later Julius Caesar would make it a Roman colony and make it the provincial capital of Achaia and place a Roman governor over it.

Luke tells us in Acts that while Paul was there he was brought before the Roman governor Gallio. The reign of Gallio can be dated from extra-Biblical sources as AD 51-52. One can still see in the Corinthian forum the remains of Gallio’s “bema” or judgment seat. And so this gives us a pretty precise time for Paul’s work in Corinth.

One can today visit the site of ancient Corinth and walk through its ancient forum, seeing the influence of the Romans.

#### ***An boom town***

Murphy O’Connor likens Corinth not to an academic center like Athens but a boom town like San Francisco during the gold rush (“The Corinth that Saint Paul Saw,” BAR , Sept. 1984).

Its strategic geographic location made it a prosperous commercial center in Greece. It was near the isthmus that connects central Greece with the Peloponnesus. Ships often stopped at both the harbor to the west (Lechaeum) and to the east (Cenchraea). In ancient times small ships and their cargo were transported across the isthmus on a road called the “diolkos.”

It is not surprising that in such a culture there would be very wealthy people and many slaves who served their economic interests.

#### ***A religiously diverse culture***

Like similar cities of the modern world, Corinth's commercialism brought to it people from all over the world and they brought with them their peculiar religions, world-views, and values. Most of the inhabitants of Corinth would have been very comfortable with the idolatry of the city.

There were people who acknowledged the help and protection of the ancient Greek gods. And the Romans had adapted or merged the ancient Greek culture with their own equating many of the Greek gods with their own.

Only the temple Apollo (ancient temple) remains of the ancient Greek city; but one can identify several things from the Roman period.

One can see evidence of the "worship" of the imperial cult there, i.e. temples in honor of deified Roman rulers and their families (eg. Temple of Julia).

There was also in Corinth a sizable Jewish synagogue where a single God was proclaimed; and there were Gentiles who were attracted to this monotheistic faith and attended the synagogue and listened to the reading of the Law, even if not becoming proselytes.

Archaeologists have found the remnants of an ancient Corinthian synagogue (a lintel and a sign)

***A town with a reputation for rampant immorality***

An ancient Greek infinitive "korinthiazesthai" meant to be a fornicator.

The town had once been the home of the temple of Aphrodite with her numerous cult prostitutes.

**The church at Corinth was formed out of this diverse culture.**

***Paul's initial efforts to reach the Jewish synagogue were only partially successful.***

*When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with proclaiming the word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus. When they opposed and reviled him, in protest he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." Then he left the synagogue and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God; his house was next door to the synagogue.*

However there was one surprising and important convert among the Jews.

*Crispus, the official of the synagogue, became a believer in the Lord, together with all his household;*

***But in time many Corinthians were persuaded.***

*and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptized.*

This would suggest that the church was a heterogenous mixture of former monotheists and polytheists.

Some had lived by very relatively high moral standards in keeping with the teaching of the Law; but others would have been practicing the full spectrum of sins. Paul would later write:

*Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor. 6:9-11)*

Some were quite wealthy perhaps even belonging to the ruling class; others very poor serving as slaves of the wealthy.

Perhaps all inherited the Greek propensity for competition and self-promotion; but it would not be hard to see that such an attitude held the potential for disagreements.

For a year and half Paul worked with the newly formed congregation seeking to hand down to them the traditions of worship and instructing them as to how to live the new life of discipleship.

*He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. (Acts 18:5-11)*

But at last he had to leave for other fields, leaving behind this new band of disciples to continue on and learn to live with each other.

The church at Corinth then had been formed into at least a relatively united body of believers; but Paul's letter reveals that there were obvious "cracks" in the unity of the body developing.

### **In Paul's letter we see the challenges of diversity.**

*As we study the book we'll see these. In many ways the whole book is a discussion of one problem after another, virtually all of which center around differences between the Christians.*

Diverse attitudes toward the preachers who had influenced the various converts there

Diverse attitudes toward members who were living in manifest immorality.

Disputes among brethren that were being taken before the local magistrates

Diverse attitudes toward participation in the meals offered at the temples

Socio-economic groupings in the church that caused some of the wealthy to disregard the poor

Competition and self-promotion in the use of spiritual gifts.

Differing viewpoint toward the teaching of the resurrection.

*And this probably should not surprise us, viz., that such a group of disciples might continue to be influenced by values and viewpoints that they had long held.*

### **In Paul's letter we see his efforts to promote unity in Christ.**

*Paul's letter then is his response to the intelligence that he has received from various sources which tells him that the group may be breaking apart. Ben Witherington suggests that Paul's letter centers rhetorically around a single theme which he introduces in the first chapter.*

*Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. (1 Cor. 1:10).*

*Paul clearly is urging the Corinthians to strive for unity, for common assent to the truth of the gospel. To continued spiritual growth that rises above misconception of the past.*

#### **How First Corinthians can help us**

*To some people 1 Corinthians seems to speak to a world quite foreign to our own. Yet we too live in a diverse culture; and different approaches are taken to these differences.*

*It is important to know what unites us; and what should not divide us.*

*It is important to know what can get in the way of the unity God seeks for us.*

*It is important to know how to solve problems that may arise because of competing ideologies and values.*

**Conclusion:** So hopefully this brief introduction gives us the background we need to start reading and thinking about this very practical book.