

United in Christ: Meeting the challenges of diversity
Studies in 1 Corinthians
Foundations for unity (How God makes diverse people one)

Intro: In our lesson last week we looked at the background of Paul's epistle to the Corinthians. We looked at some of the features of Corinthian life that reflected the diversity of the culture from which the church at Corinth was formed. And we noticed that Paul's concern in this letter is how the diversity of attitudes and viewpoints in the congregation is causing cracks in its unity.

Often in Paul's letters, he prepares his target audience for his main messages even in his introductory remarks to them before he comes to the body of his letter. Let's see if there is evidence of this in this letter.

Paul's greeting and thanksgiving

Paul uses the standard conventions of letter writing in his own time. He begins with a greeting and then in typical epistolary style follows with a word of thanksgiving. But since this is spiritual correspondence Paul is often more elaborate in his expressions.

Paul's greeting

Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:1-3)

Paul's prayer of thanks

I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor. 1:4-9)

How God makes diverse people one

As we noticed last week, Paul's entire letter is rhetorically tied together with the appeal for unity. And it would not surprise us then that Paul in his initial remarks says things that will serve as a foundation for his teaching. In this section we can see how God made the diverse Corinthians one! They are not merely individual disciples; they are a "community" of disciples. And we can see that Paul remarks center around the past, the present, and the future.

My goal tonight is not to unpack or decode everything Paul is saying in these verses as we might do in a verse by verse Bible study, but to see the key ideas that may contribute to Paul's overall message.

God past provisions--God's people are united by their calling to fellowship with Christ!

The Corinthians have been bound together as a church. They are together the "assembly" of God in Corinth.

The Corinthians have been unified by a common experience of salvation. They have all "called upon the name of the Lord." This expression indicates their trust in Jesus Christ for salvation by obedience to the gospel.

The Corinthians have been unified by the results of their salvation. They are now "sanctified in Christ." Their salvation has separated or consecrated them in the Lord. Thus, they are "saints" (Paul uses the related Greek word for sanctified or holy people; the word doesn't mean "super-Christians" or have any of the associations of Roman Catholic canonization).

The Corinthians have been bound together with other believers around the world—the universal church. God's church is larger than the local congregation of which they are a part.

And as we think about all these things they are all related to God and not to any man. It is God's church; it is Christ's name; it is consecration in Christ, And it is from the Father and Christ that they enjoy grace and peace.

God's present provisions—God's people are united by their equipping in Christ!

Paul affirms that God's grace is given them in Christ and that grace takes the form of the revelation of God's will to them. They have received the treasure of truth. (I wonder if Paul capitalizes upon the commercial orientation of the Corinthian society.) If the goal for most people at Corinth has been to become wealthy, Paul affirms that these disciples have been enriched beyond measure with spiritual knowledge).

The source of this knowledge is the confirmatory gifts of the Spirit that they have received. The testimony of Christ was given to them by Paul; but now through the laying on of his hands, they are able to experience the full complement of spiritual gifts (Cf. chapter 12). They have access to everything they need to know to be united in Christ.

Yet as Paul describes these provisions he does so in way that does not bolster what may be the already too inflated egos of some of the Corinthians. He reminds them in fact that everything that they are and everything that they have is the result of God's "grace." Even the gifts in which they glory are "charismata," i.e. grace gifts.

God's future provisions—God's people are united by their hope in Christ!

Paul sets before the Corinthians two goals, one which prepares the way for the other.

The near-term goal is confirmation by means of the spiritual gifts; the long-term goal is blamelessness at the coming of the Lord.

In other words, what Paul sets before the Corinthians is a mechanism by which their diverse viewpoints and practices will merge into

conformity with the teaching of the gospel so that there will be no point of accusation by Christ against them on the Day of Judgment. And this hope unites them. They all should want to continue to grow in their understanding and in their conformity to the will of God so that they are prepared to meet the Lord.

Finally Paul assures them that all this will be realized because of the nature of God Himself! He is faithful! He keeps His word; He finishes what He starts!

Yet again, these statements may anticipate some of the attitudes displayed by the Corinthians. They have not arrived; in fact they are just beginning their journey. They may have been called “saints;” but they lack much the holiness that is implicit in such a description as the letter will make clear.

In summary then, the Corinthians have been united by a common “fellowship” or “partnership” with Jesus and resultantly with one another. He is the tie that binds them!

Lessons for us!

What Paul said to the Corinthians can also be very helpful to us in seeing ourselves as a “community” of faith.

All these principles of unity still hold God’s people together!

We too are united by a common calling—salvation in Christ.

We too are united by a common guide—the Scriptures.

We too are united by a common hope—spiritual maturity and acceptance at the judgment.

And like the Corinthians we must see these things are a reminder that we are what we are by the grace of God, that all that we know has been given us by God so that there is no reason to gloat over our knowledge; and that we too have a lot of growing to do before Jesus comes again!

It is these principles that should set the trajectory of our identity, fellowship, and goals as a congregation.

It is Christ who should serve as the focus our identity.

When we say we are a “church of Christ” are we saying that we are a part of a movement or association of churches who have the same name on the church building, have the same plan for the worship service, and the same church directory of the faithful? It is easy to make a not-so-subtle shift in identity.

“Church of Christ” becomes an association of churches defined by various issues (non-instrumental, no-Bible class, no women teachers, non-institutional, etc.). I’m not saying we should not explore what the truth is on issues; I’m saying that our identity as disciples can get tied up in issues rather than in the person we follow.

It is Christ who should serve as the focus of our fellowship.

And then we can advance the argument a bit more. When our identity is tied up in issues, then other people become the focus of our fellowship. We become preoccupied with knowing “who’s” in and “who’s out”, carving out our space in a religious turf war. Again I am not saying we can have fellowship with anyone and everyone. I’m saying the focus of our fellowship is not a man, a group of men, a group of conforming churches; the focus of our fellowship should be with Christ. He’s the only one we’ll have to answer to on the Day of Judgment.

It is Christ’s mission that should serve as the focus of our work.

As Christ’s church we are part of the plan of the ages, a people redeemed by God to glorify Him in this world and save others, not merely a brief chapter in the story of a religious movement or more specifically a page in the story of a brotherhood controversy.

Our goal should always be to keep listening to Him as carefully and objectively as we can, not merely replaying someone else’s understanding of the Scripture passed down to us.

Let him set the agenda for our work. And I would suggest that unity is pretty high on His agenda—the kind that results from seeking to know the word and apply the word so that we can be presented before Him without blame. And the questions we need to ask is, “How is the best way to create a learning environment in which God’s truth is understood and practiced among us?”

Conclusion: The gospel of Christ was intended to make diverse people one in Christ. Ironically those professing to follow Christ are not always very united and I suspect it is because people keep making the same mistakes the Corinthians made. Hopefully we’ll learn from their experiences and be the united people God wants us to be.