



COMMENTARIES ON "1 CORINTHIANS"

Chapter 1

The Holy Apostle Paul begins his first epistle to the Corinthians according to what was, at that time, the traditional method for beginning a letter: he stated his name, the intended recipient of the letter, and then gives a greeting (1:1-3). Notice, however, the unique Christian twist to this formula: he gives his credentials as an apostle, and then identifies his audience as those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints. His identifying himself as an apostle is important because, as we shall see in chapter nine, there were some Corinthians who did not believe that he was an apostle (some commentators also believe that his adding "through the will of God" in verse one is a reference to his conversion (Acts 22:10), as well as to his unique mission to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15)).

The identity of Sosthenes is not conclusively known, but he is traditionally believed to be the former leader of the synagogue in Corinth (Acts 18:17), but who became a Christian (and whose life, Fr. Lawrence Farley rightly notes, parallels somewhat that of St. Paul).

The identification of the Corinthian Christians as "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1:2) is very important in this book, because it strikes right to the heart of the divisiveness that existed in the Corinthian church. St. Paul did not refer to "the church of Corinth," and certainly did not identify it as "my church:" instead, it is God's church, and it is filled with those who have been sanctified through their relationship with Jesus Christ. To be sanctified means to be set apart, and saints in this context does not necessarily mean "holy persons" (in fact, the point of 1 Corinthians is that the Christians in Corinth were not behaving in a holy manner), but instead refers to those who are separated as the people of God. Thus, by referring to the Corinthians as those who are sanctified and called to be saints, St. Paul is extending the concept of God's ownership: the church belongs to God, because the people belong to God.

Verses three and four refer to the grace of God: grace is the great gift of God, and peace is its result. This is reinforced in the following verses, where St. Paul says that God's grace was given to the Corinthians by Jesus Christ (1:4), and they were given the gifts of utterance and knowledge (1:5) - gifts that were particularly prized by the Corinthians - and thus were given peace through having the truth of the Gospel confirmed in them (1:6). St. Jerome explains that - as St. Paul indicates in verses 7-9 - the possession of these gifts do not mean that Christians are perfect: "Although we lack no gift, nevertheless we await the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will then keep us secure in all things and present us unimpeachable when the day of our Lord Jesus Christ comes."

In verses 10-11 St. Paul gets into one of his primary reasons for writing to the Corinthians: their church was being torn apart by dissensions and rivalries between competing groups. Some of the Christians retained a fierce loyalty to St. Paul, their founding Apostle; some were loyal to Apollos, who was known for his great learning (Acts 18:24); and some were loyal to the Holy Apostle Peter (which is a translation of "Cephas," the Aramaic name given to him by Christ (John 1:42)). Some even pretended to take the spiritual "high road" and claimed that only they followed Christ - interestingly, many individuals make

the same claim today when they attempt to make Christianity more acceptable to postmodern North Americans by rejecting the teaching (particularly the moral teaching) of St. Paul. St. John Chrysostom points out the problem with such a claim to follow Christ while separating oneself from other Christians:

Why did he add, 'And I of Christ?' For although these who addicted themselves to men were in error, not surely those who dedicated themselves unto Christ. But this was not his charge, that they called themselves by the Name of Christ, but that they did not all call themselves by that Name alone. And I think that he added this of himself, wishing to make the accusation more grievous, and to point out that by this rule Christ must be considered as belonging to one party only: although they were not so using the Name themselves.

St. Paul goes on to rhetorically ask, "Is Christ divided" (1:13)? The answer, of course, is no. St. Paul expresses gladness that he personally baptized only Ss. Crispus (another former head of the Corinthian synagogue (Acts 18:8)) and Gaius (Romans 16:23) - as well as the household of Stephanus - so that a group of Corinthians would not be able to claim that Paul had baptized them in his name (rather than in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19)). St. Paul's calling was not baptism itself, but preaching the gospel; and even with this, he points out that his preaching is not effective because of any great speaking style, because if it were it would overshadow the power of the Cross of Christ.

Christians should be very familiar with the point made by St. Paul in the remainder of this chapter: a non-Christian society (and certainly an abjectly pagan one like that of Corinth) will see the Christian message as mere foolishness, but Christians will experience and know it as the power of God (1:18). St. Paul applies to the first century world (and, by extension, to our world) the words of God in Isaiah 29:14, saying that the wisdom of the world has been destroyed (1:19). This is a very important point, because it strikes at the heart not only of the dissensions in Corinth, but also in the approach that too many people today take toward salvation - it is not possible through man-made philosophies and systems of thought to come to an understanding of Who God is, and how we related to Him; it is only possible to do these things (to the limited extent that humans can) through accepting and living out the "foolish" message of the gospel (1:21).

In making this point, St. Paul addresses two erroneous approaches to determining religious truth. The Jewish approach - according to which Saul of Tarsus was raised - demanded miraculous signs and displays of power (see Matthew 16:1-4), but Jesus Christ died a humiliating death that many Jews could not accept would happen to the Messiah (based on Deuteronomy 21:23; see Galatians 3:13). Those influenced by Greek thought, however, demanded a complex system taught by deeply learned men and held by sophisticated leaders in society; instead, the converts to Christianity were usually not considered wise, mighty, or noble (1:26). It is just through such a "foolish" gospel and foolish people, however, that God shows His power and puts to shame worldly values.

Instead of relying upon such approaches to determining truth and salvation, the Christians of Corinth - and modern Orthodox Christians - glory in Jesus Christ, "Who became for us wisdom from God - and righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1:30, 31).