



The Unifier for a Sectarian Culture – 1 Corinthians 1

Monday Bible Study Outline-Synodical Convention
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“One Message -- CHRIST -- His Love Is Here For You”

1. The Setting

The city of Corinth, perched on the isthmus dividing Greece, was the ultimate destination in St. Paul's Second Mission Journey. Why? Because when the Romans took over Greece in the mid-second-century B.C., they transferred its capital from Athens to Corinth. And Paul, who, throughout the book of *Acts* loved to speak truth to power, saw stunning opportunities for the Gospel in this political, economic, and social capital. In fact, he would base his ministry here for the next eighteen months.

Corinth, however, seemed to be the mission field “least likely to succeed,” since it was a hotbed of competing cults, pagan idolatry, gross materialism, and sexual immorality. The Greek verb “to Corinthianize” meant to engage in every vice available. Looming over the city was the great Acrocorinthos, crowned with a temple to Aphrodite, goddess of love, sex, and reproduction. Paul certainly enjoyed his challenges, but it would seem that his mission here was doomed from the start.

And yet it proved surprisingly effective after all. He won converts to the faith from the Jewish synagogue in Corinth, including Crispus, its president. When he was haled before no less than the Roman governor of Greece, Lucius Junius Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia (and Luke has that title exactly correct), the stage was set for the first test case for Christianity in the Mediterranean world. It was probably the most important trial in history since Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate. And Paul won! Gallio did exactly what Pontius Pilate wanted to do at the trial of Jesus: he threw the case against Paul out of court, thus legalizing Christianity at Corinth!

At this point, I just can't resist telling you how beautifully accurate is Luke's account in the Book of Acts. Paul's appearance before Gallio has become the chronological cornerstone in the chronology of his life. (The inscription at Delphi.) This also explains why Paul would later appeal for justice to Nero Caesar: Nero's tutor and advisor was none other than the great Stoic philosopher Seneca, who happened to be the full-blooded **brother of** Gallio, who ran Nero's courts. Basically, Paul was appealing to the very man whose brother had thrown the case against Paul out of court!

Now, it seemed, the church's problems at Corinth there were over. Or were they? Sadly, after Paul left, sectarian squabbles broke out, and the Christians there nicely quartered themselves into four “cult of personality” groups, favoring Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), and – to finesse the others – Christ. Paul, now in Ephesus on his Third Mission Journey, had to intervene by letter. Today we call that letter 1 Corinthians.

2. The Letter

As you read the all-important Chapter One of 1 Corinthians, Paul's message seems to have five parts:

Verses 1 to 9: Introduction and compliments to the young congregation at Corinth.
Diplomatically, Paul often begins his epistles in this way, though not always.

V. 10 to 12: Paul exposes the problem of dissension in the Corinthian church.

V. 13 to 17: Sectarianism and quarreling in the church is *not* what Jesus had in mind.

V. 18 to 25: Wisdom and folly -- by earthly standards -- are reversed in God's divine plan for the world in Christ, leading to the climactic claims in verses 22 to 25.

V. 26 to 31: Here Paul applies the message to the Corinthians themselves, a theme that he will pursue further in chapters 2 through 4 – and, in fact, through much of his letter.

3. And This Convention?

Rarely has an application been so *easy*! Not that we have problems involving pagan idolatry, gross materialism, or sexual immorality as was the case in Corinth! But in one respect we do draw a clear parallel to those ancient Corinthians, and that is the existence of divisions, party spirit, sectarianism, politicization, and even talk of schism.

The **general** reason for this is that today we have probably the most sectarian culture in history. The options promoting divisions in society are virtually unlimited. Specialties, niches, are available for everyone, including the worst category of all: the option to ignore God entirely. Why else are our newsstands cluttered with magazines to cover every possible hobby, interest, or even lust? Why do people worry that even 500 channels on television might not be enough? The cohesion in the simpler existence of yesteryear seems to have disintegrated.

The **specific** promoter of division in the LCMS is not, of course, to ignore God in Christ, but rather to insist that **my** particular interpretation of Scripture, **our** understanding of doctrine, and especially **our** practice are the only ones that God favors. Those of others God must utterly disdain. The examples are many:

Publications, web-sites, blogs, and e-mails that regularly transgress the Eighth Commandment, thriving on the process of sowing discord.

Putting the worst (not best) construction on words and actions of those "in another camp." Even the remarkable Synodical initiative- Ablaze! - has been faulted by ultra critical "purists" in our church. How very sad!

Lawsuits against the Synod and its leadership – incredibly, the very same problem that Paul will condemn in chapter six of his first letter to Corinth, where he concludes, "*To have lawsuits at all with one another is a defeat for you.*" (v. 7) Bottom line: Paul tells the Corinthians (and us): "Don't go to law: this is sin!" And that is quite apart from the other sin of draining Synodical resources for having gone to law in the first place!

4. The Remedy

In *Paul's* day, it was to focus on Christ and heed his message of unity in a sectarian world, as witness his prayer in the Upper Room that His followers "may all be brought to complete unity" (John 17:23)

The result? At first the Corinthian congregation was ticked off at Paul's letter (as we know from 2 Corinthians), but it finally listened to Paul, and a **strong** church was established at Corinth. The early church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, tells of a gifted second-century Bishop of Corinth, Dionysius, who had enormous prestige in the area and wrote superb letters to bishops in Crete and the rest of Greece. In one of them, he tells that another Dionysius, one of two named converts after Paul's Mars Hill address in Acts 17, became the first Bishop of Athens.

In *our* day, the remedy is really is exactly the same: to focus on Christ and heed his message of unity in our sectarian church and world. Like Martin Luther King, "I have a dream" for our beloved Synod:...that we would leave this convention as if Jesus himself had attended it, and told this convention: **"I understand your concerns about Communion, church, ministry, worship, the roles women and men, and your outreach to the world, but in the name of the sovereign God who created the universe, get over your quarrels and be about your Father's business!!"** And that we would leave Houston with a wondrous spirit of unity in which there were no victors, no losers, but Christian brothers and sisters gloriously one in Christ, ablaze with the desire to pass on the Good News to a world that needs it so badly.