

J. KYLE PAISLEY MEMORIAL FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Adult Bible Class Studies

21st January 2007

Read: 1 Corinthians 1: 1-9

An Introduction to the New Testament

No.13, First Corinthians

Paul was the first to preach the Gospel at Corinth, thus was the founder of the church there, see ch.3: 6 & ch. 4: 15. The record of the formation of the Corinthian church is given in Acts 18: 1-18. Note in v.1 that he went to Corinth from Athens – this is an important detail. Athens was the centre of Greek culture & philosophy; there Paul had preached for a short time only, with apparently less success than he normally enjoyed. But he left Athens having learned two vital lessons.

First, in Athens he saw first hand the folly & uselessness of human wisdom. Thus, he left Athens more convinced than ever of the powerlessness of man's philosophy to deal with the great needs of the human heart. Hence, he was more convinced than ever of the need to preach Christ in His fulness for man in all his need. See 1 Cor 2: 1 & 2 – these verses can only be understood in the light of his recent experience at Athens. See also in the ch.1 in this first epistle to the Corinthian church Paul's plain repudiation of worldly wisdom, vs. 17-31; and his clear assertion that all true wisdom and power are found in Christ alone, v.24.

Second – he left Athens with a deeper sense of his own powerlessness to confront the needs of men. See 1 Cor 2: 3-5 – these verses must be understood in the light of the Athenian experience. Because he had witnessed the tremendous grip and influence of human philosophy on Greek life & culture, there was a fear and a foreboding upon him in terms of the realisation of his inability to accomplish anything. He realised that he must have no reliance on any powers of his own in Gospel ministry. Rather, his preaching had to be "*in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.*" Thus, he went to Corinth determined to preach the Gospel with no human embellishment, but looking only to the Lord to make it fruitful by the power of the Holy Spirit.

THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH ESTABLISHED UNDER GREAT POWER

With his mind prepared as noted, Paul went to Corinth and experienced great blessing on his ministry. There was the usual Jewish opposition, v.6; but nonetheless God blessed, saving Jews & Gentiles, v.8. It is clear that Paul felt the opposition keenly and was obviously very fearful, yet the Lord encouraged him in a marvellous way, vs. 9 & 10. These are words that should be pondered solemnly by any who claim not to believe in divine sovereignty and the doctrine of election with respect to the salvation of sinners. While some had been saved in Corinth at this point, the vast majority of those who would form the Corinthian church were not in Christ. But the Lord told Paul that He had a people to be saved; & that Paul should keep on preaching for that was the divine means of the salvation of men, see 1 Cor 1: 21. It was the knowledge of these truths that then contributed to Paul's ministry the perseverance that he then exhibited, v.11.

It is obvious, therefore, that a great awakening took place in Corinth, this epistle containing the evidence that a plurality of churches came into existence; cp 1 Cor 1: 2 with ch.14: 34. Incidentally, what a clear proof of the unity of Christ's church and of Presbyterian Church government there is in these verses: here was a plurality of churches in Corinth, yet they are referred to as "*the church of God which is at Corinth.*"

The Corinthian church also enjoyed the ministry of Apollos, ch.3: 5 & 6. See Acts 18: 24-28 – note the sequence of events. Vs.18 & 19 – Paul, along with Priscilla & Aquila went to Ephesus, and he left them there and moved on to complete this second missionary journey. V.24, Apollos then came to Ephesus and was helped to a clearer understanding of the Gospel by Aquila & Priscilla, v.26. Apollos then desired to go to Achaia, v.27 – which was the region of Greece where Corinth was situated; thus this would be a reference to his going to Corinth where he exercised a powerful ministry. Thus, Apollos went to Corinth after Paul had already gone to Ephesus and had moved on from there. From that perspective his ministry was one of watering where Paul had sown; but it was a blessed & mighty ministry that Apollos discharged among the Corinthians.

In Corinth the power of the Gospel had wrought a great change in many lives, ch.6: 9-11. Moreover, it was a church with greatly gifted people, ch.1: 5-7. Thus, in its initial experiences the Corinthian church was set on a solid foundation, 1 Cor 3: 10 and with all of the endowment of the Spirit was fitted to carry on a great ministry. The Corinthian church, therefore, had a great beginning.

THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH TROUBLED BY GREAT PROBLEMS

Serious problems arose in the Corinthian Church bringing great sorrow to Paul's heart. See Acts 19: 21 – he planned that on his way to Jerusalem he would go to Macedonia & Achaia, which would have included Corinth since it was in Achaia. But that visit never came about, thus he sent Timothy & Erastus, v.22; and see 1 Cor 4: 17. Also, a deputation of leading Corinthians had gone to Paul, bringing with them news of the situation in Corinth, as well as a letter in which they set before Paul some of the matters that were perplexing the Corinthians; see ch.16: 17 & ch.7: 1. Thus, this epistle was written in response to the news of the great problems that had begun to trouble the Corinthian church. It is a tragedy that this letter ever had to be written, yet at the same time it has proved to be a blessing in the providence of God. For, the problems that arose among the Corinthians have troubled Christ's Church in every age and still do to this very day in the 21st century. What were the Corinthian problems?

1. The substitution of human reasoning in the place of the preaching of Christ. This is really what's in view in ch.1: 17-31. Note especially v.17 – the inference is that the Corinthians had not openly abandoned the Gospel but they were presenting it in terms of human philosophy; hence, Paul's stern repudiation as already noted.
2. Deep divisions of various kinds – ch.1: 11. Over personalities, v.12, a demonstration of great carnality, ch.3: 1-4; over the Lord's Supper, ch.11: 18 and onwards. Such was the division among Corinthian believers that they were suing one another in the civil court before the ungodly, ch.6: 1.
3. Toleration of immorality – the background of the Corinthians had been one of deep immorality, ch.6: 9 & 11. Then a situation arose where a case of deep immorality was tolerated, ch.5: 1; and ch.6: 13-20 reveal that fornication with harlots was also being practised & tolerated. Thus, the problem was essentially one of a lack of church discipline.
4. Confusion over marriage & divorce, ch.7.
5. Failure to observe the role of male & female in the worship service, ch.11: 1-16.
6. Confusion over the spiritual gifts, chs.12-14.
7. Toleration of heretical teaching – especially on the subject of the resurrection, ch.15.
8. The issue of eating meats offered to idols, chs.8-10.

THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH DELIVERED BY GREAT PRINCIPLES

Paul's response to the problems in the Corinthian Church was to set before them certain Christ-centred principles of Biblical truth. Thus, his method of dealing with these problems was theological – which must always be the case in combating any church problem of faith and practice.

The principles that Paul employs, as noted, are Christ-centred. Specifically they all relate to Christ's redemptive work for His people; and within that framework Paul writes this letter. There are three redemptive principles that Paul incorporates in this letter:

1. Redemption Accomplished – key verse is ch.1: 30; and throughout the epistle Paul brings the Corinthians continually to Christ's entire redemptive work accomplished for His people in His life, death, resurrection & intercession at God's right hand.
2. Redemption Applied – it is the Spirit who applies to believers the benefits of redemption; thus shows this fact, beginning in ch.2: 10-16 and then throughout the epistle.
3. Redemption Anticipated – i.e. final redemption at the coming of Christ when all of the Church's problems will be gone forever, ch.15: 23.

Rev. John Greer