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DAVID PRIOR

The Message of

1 Corinthians

THE NEW TESTAMENT SERIES EDITOR: JOHN R. W. STOTT

The Message of 1 Corinthians

Life in the local church

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General preface

THE BIBLE SPEAKS TODAY describes three series of expositions, based on the books of the Old and New Testaments, and on Bible themes that run through the whole of Scripture. Each series is characterized by a threefold ideal:

- to expound the biblical text with accuracy
- to relate it to contemporary life, and
- to be readable.

These books are, therefore, not ‘commentaries’, for the commentary seeks rather to elucidate the text than to apply it, and tends to be a work rather of reference than of literature. Nor, on the other hand, do they contain the kinds of ‘sermons’ that attempt to be contemporary and readable without taking Scripture seriously enough. The contributors to *The Bible Speaks Today* series are all united in their convictions that God still speaks through what he has spoken, and that nothing is more necessary for the life, health and growth of Christians than that they should hear what the Spirit is saying to them through his ancient—yet ever modern—Word.

ALEC MOTYER
JOHN STOTT
DEREK TIDBALL
Series editors

For Rosemary,
who shares life in the local church with me,
who knows its full cost more deeply,
and without whom I could not adequately
sustain its sorrows or appreciate its joys.

Author's preface

Paul's letter to the Christian church at Corinth first came alive to me in the city of Cape Town—a city, like Corinth, dominated by a mountain; like Corinth, a cosmopolitan and heterogeneous seaport; like Corinth, the meeting-point of many different cultures, creeds and cults; like Corinth in the fifties of the first century, the focus in the 1970s for a remarkable outpouring of the Spirit of God on his church.

In the early months of 1974 the people of God in the parish of Wynberg, a suburb of Cape Town, wrestled with the text of 1 Corinthians in a weekly Bible School. As the renewing power of God's Spirit percolated through the parish, we all struggled with the tensions and the joys inherent in any such situation. Opportunities emerged for sharing the studies and the life in other contexts—with fellow-clergy on a diocesan retreat; with a mixed group (in all senses) of Christians in the university city of Grahamstown; with another parish in Durban. Then, in 1976, there came an opportunity to be exposed to the church in renewal in a totally different culture from either England or Southern Africa: a month spent experiencing new life in the church in Chile and among the people of God in Buenos Aires.

There have been other contexts—in England, USA, Canada, Brazil, Jamaica, Zimbabwe, Uganda and South Africa—where the issues raised in 1 Corinthians have been debated, often during conferences or missions—not least between October 1979 and March 1980 at St Aldate's Church, Oxford.

In other words, this book is the result of living and ministering on the *inside* of what is (conveniently but misleadingly) called Renewal with a capital 'R'—and that in a rich diversity of cultures.

From this diverse experience over the last 17 or 18 years has come the ever-increasing conviction, not simply that 'The Bible speaks today', but that 1 Corinthians is uniquely a tract for the times. Perhaps we ought to say 1 *and* 2 Corinthians, because the Corinthian correspondence as a whole so clearly holds in balance the double vocation of God's people—to glory and to suffering.

C. K. Barrett, whose two superb commentaries in the A. & C. Black series consistently illumine the text of Corinthians, has put it memorably:

I believe that the church in our generation needs to rediscover the apostolic Gospel; and for this it needs the Epistle to the Romans. It needs also to rediscover the relation between this Gospel and its order, discipline, worship and ethics; and for this it needs the 1st Epistle to the Corinthians. If it makes these discoveries, it may well find itself broken; and this may turn out to be the meaning of the 2nd Epistle to the Corinthians. (1967)

... Yet an earthenware vessel that contains such treasure need not fear breaking; it is the apostolic vocation to carry about the killing of Jesus and those who accept it are apt to find the funeral transformed into a triumph, as they learn to trust not in themselves but in Him who raises the dead. (1972)

I owe an immense debt to Anne Johnson and Betty Ho Sang, who helped tirelessly with typing and re-typing the manuscript. I am very grateful to John Stott for his encouragement and incisive comments, also to Frank Entwistle and members of the IVP Editorial Committee for their shrewd appraisal of style and content.

It is inevitable that any treatment of 1 Corinthians will not please, let alone satisfy, some readers. My prayer is that this book will enable many churches, directly and indirectly, to recognize and to tackle the problems inherent in being God's people in the world today. It is good to remember that 'God is faithful', especially in and through all our trials and tribulations. 'The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.'

DAVID PRIOR

Chief abbreviations

Of the many commentaries on the Corinthian correspondence, the following were most frequently consulted:

- Allo Le P. E.-B. Allo, *Saint Paul, Première Épître aux Corinthiens* (J. Gabalda, Paris, 1956).
- Barclay W. Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians (The Daily Study Bible, The Saint Andrew Press, 1954)*.
- Barrett C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians (Black's New Testament Commentaries, A. & C. Black, 1968)*.
- Bruce F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians (The New Century Bible Commentaries, Eerdmans and Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1971)*.
- Conzelmann Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Hermeneia, Fortress Press, 1975).
- Dods Marcus Dods, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians (The Expositor's Bible, Hodder & Stoughton, 1889)*.
- Godet F. Godet, *Commentary on St Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians* (T. & T. Clark, 1889), 2 volumes.
- Goudge H. L. Goudge, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Westminster Commentaries, Methuen, 1903)*.
- Hodge Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians (Geneva Series, Banner of Truth, 1958)*.
- Morgan G. Campbell Morgan, *The Corinthian Letters of Paul* (Oliphants, 1947).
- Morris L. Morris, *1 Corinthians (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Inter-Varsity Press, 1958)*.
- Ruef John S. Ruef, *Paul's First Letter to Corinth (Pelican New Testament Commentaries, Penguin, 1971)*.

In addition, considerable use was made of Arnold Bittlenger, *Gifts and Graces* (Eng. tr., Hodder & Stoughton, 1967)—an exegetical commentary on chapters 12 to 14.

Introduction

Corinth stood on a narrow isthmus, only four miles across, linking the southern part of Greece with the rest of the country and countries to the north. In this important position it inevitably became a prosperous centre of trade and commerce: by land everyone came through Corinth; by sea sailors usually chose to use Lechaëum and Cenchreae, the two seaports flanking Corinth at either end of the isthmus, rather than circumnavigating the dangerous waters of Cape Malea at the southern tip of Greece (a distance of over 200 miles). For large ships it was a matter of unloading at one port and having the cargo carried by porters to the other, to be re-embarked on another ship. Small ships could be placed on rollers and dragged across the isthmus, to be re-launched the other side. Nero, Emperor of Rome from AD 40 to 66, actually made an abortive attempt to build a canal across the isthmus. The Corinth Canal was completed only in 1893.

Like most seaports, Corinth became both prosperous and licentious—so much so that the Greeks had a word for leading a life of debauchery: *Korinthiazein*, i.e. to live like a Corinthian. Homer^[1] talks of ‘wealthy Corinth’ and Thucydides^[2] refers to its military importance, which it owed to its control of the seaports of Lechaëum and Cenchreae. The Isthmian Games, second in importance only to the Olympic Games, were held at Corinth.

Dominating the city was the ‘Acrocorinth’, a hill of over 1,850 feet, on which stood a large temple to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. The 1,000 priestesses of the temple, who were sacred prostitutes, came down into the city when evening fell and plied their trade in the streets.

‘The cult was dedicated to the glorification of sex.’^[3] The worship of Aphrodite is parallel to that of the Ashtoreth (taken from Syrian worship of Astarte) in the days of Solomon, Jeroboam and Josiah^[4]

At the foot of the Acrocorinth was the worship of Melicertes, patron deity of navigation—the same as Melkart, the chief god or ‘baal’ of the city of Tyre (whose cult was introduced into Israel in the ninth century BC when Ahab married Jezebel, daughter of the ruler of Tyre and Sidon).^[5] Thus, Astarte and Melkart, goddess and god at Corinth, were the direct result of oriental influence.

In addition, there was the Temple of Apollo in the city itself—Apollo, the god of music, song and poetry; also, the ideal of male beauty. Nude statues and friezes of Apollo in various poses of virility fired his male worshippers to physical displays of devotion with the god’s beautiful boys. Corinth was therefore a centre of homosexual practices.^[6]

Historical factors also played a significant part in forming the culture of the Corinth which Paul reached in AD 50. In 146 BC the Achaean League of Greek city-states, which had been defying Roman expansion for some time, collapsed and Corinth (which had led the opposition to Rome) was levelled; its citizens were killed or sold into slavery. Thus the strategic site remained for a century, until Julius Caesar (who knew a good thing when he saw it) refounded Corinth as a Roman colony.

A Roman colony was a little Rome planted in other lands amid a non-Roman population to be a centre of Roman life and to maintain the Roman peace. Along the great Roman roads—those military highways which ran from Rome to the various frontiers of the Empire—these colonies of Roman citizens were planted at strategic points and they played an important part in the imperial organization.^[7]

From that date, 46 BC, Corinth emerged into new prosperity and with an increasingly cosmopolitan character. As a Roman colony, Corinth received its share of veterans from the Roman army, who were given land in Corinth to enable them to set up home as settlers. This powerful minority ensured a Roman flavour to the new city, but it soon became a hotchpotch of races, creeds, languages and cultures. Those with commercial interests, entrepreneurs and the like, began to take up residence, including many Jews. Farrar describes Corinth as:

This mongrel and heterogeneous population of Greek adventurers and Roman bourgeois, with a tainting infusion of Phoenicians; this mass of Jews, ex-soldiers, philosophers, merchants, sailors, freedmen, slaves, trades-people, hucksters and agents of every form of vice.^[8]

Barclay characterizes her as a colony ‘without aristocracy, without tradition and without well-established citizens’.^[9]

Corinth was a rough, tough place in the middle of the first century. It is not difficult to imagine something of its reputation and its reality. Nor is it a reflection on modern cities such as San Francisco, Rio de Janeiro or Cape Town to see them as counterparts of that urban challenge to the apostolic gospel.

Pollock puts the situation Paul faced like this:

Corinth was the biggest city Paul had yet encountered, a brash new commercial metropolis.... It squeezed nearly a quarter of a million people into a comparatively small area, a large proportion being slaves engaged in the unending movement of goods. Slaves or free, Corinthians were rootless, cut off from their country background, drawn from races and districts all over the empire ... a curiously close parallel to the population of a 20th Century “inner-city”.... Paul had seen a Christian church grow and flourish in the moderately-sized cities he had found in Macedonia. If the love of Christ Jesus could take root in Corinth, the most populated, wealthy, commercial-minded and sex-obsessed city of eastern Europe, it must prove powerful anywhere.^[10]

Paul at Corinth

In view of these factors, it is not all that surprising to discover that Paul talks of his arrival in Corinth as full of ‘much fear

and trembling¹¹—he was very scared indeed. However confident he was in the power of the gospel, whatever the proper interpretation of the nature and impact of his preaching to the Athenians immediately before coming to Corinth, however shell-shocked he had been by savage treatment up north in Macedonia a few weeks earlier—Paul would have been less than normal if he had not been considerably affected by the reputation of Corinth in the Mediterranean world. The fact that he makes a strong point of his ‘much fear and trembling’ would indicate that he found Corinth distinctively, if not uniquely, awesome.

A narrative of Paul’s 18 months’ stay in Corinth (longer than anywhere he visited except for Ephesus) is provided in Acts 18:1–18. From this we can gather a few outline-facts about his ministry. As in Ephesus, he practised his trade as a tentmaker, at least in the opening weeks of his ministry until he had worked himself into the situation and had become known as a preacher and a teacher. A love-gift from the churches in Macedonia and Philippi, brought later by Silas and Timothy, also gave him freedom to concentrate on his preaching and teaching ministry. If his daily timetable in Ephesus is anything to go by, Paul might well have given as many as eight hours a day to his manual work, leaving perhaps 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. for his ministry of the word.¹² In the hot months of the year in a Mediterranean climate, this represents a rigorous daily schedule for a man obviously not blessed with the best of health.

A closer study of Luke’s account of Paul’s time in Corinth will further bring to life the apostle’s relationship with the Christians in that city.

Compared with his rough treatment at the hands of the Macedonians, especially at Philippi, Paul had a relatively straightforward time in Athens—the usual combination of mockery and interest, but not many believers. However, the church was founded in Athens. He came to Corinth feeling weak in every way—physically battered, spiritually unexcited by the Athenian experience, emotionally deprived of the partnership of Silas and Timothy, and naturally rather in trepidation at the prospect of coming face to face with the city of love.

It is reasonable to infer that Paul reached Corinth in about March 50 and stayed there until about September 51 (the dates may be a year or so out). The most probable date for 1 Corinthians is in the early months of 54, or possibly towards the end of 53 (*i.e.* about the middle of his two and a half years in Ephesus).

Walking through the streets, his attention was drawn inevitably to traders in his own occupation of tentmaking (or, more widely, leatherwork). Apparently Paul, as a rabbi, would have found it necessary to have some other source of income, because rabbis were expected to perform their religious and legal functions without demanding a fee. One of the local crafts in his own province of Cilicia was tentmaking, with the cloth made from goats’ hair (known as ‘cilicium’). He would most naturally have been attracted to such an indigenous craft, finding as much pride and pleasure in doing his work creatively as no doubt Jesus himself did in his carpentry. He recognized a fellow-Jew when he saw one in Aquila, and it does not require much imagination to visualize their initial conversation. Aquila and Priscilla were already accustomed to a fairly mobile life and would readily have offered the hospitality of their home to this lonely preacher, who had also found completeness and ‘shalom’ in Jesus.

It is difficult to overestimate the encouragement this encounter would have brought to Paul in his ‘weakness’. Indeed God seems to have given him very significant encouragement all the way through his 18 months in Corinth. Aquila and Priscilla were the first example; then comes the arrival of Silas and Timothy, not only bringing good news of the Macedonian churches, but making a powerful team of five to penetrate this crucial provincial capital with the gospel. Such shared ministry is fundamental: it needs to be based on strong friendship and partnership, not merely doing ‘Christian’ activities together but sharing the whole of life. Aquila and Priscilla became close partners with Paul and were prepared to move home and job at the summons of the Spirit in furtherance of the gospel.

As always, Paul initially concentrated on the synagogue and, in spite of direct and (later) concerted opposition from the Jewish community, found great encouragement in the conversion of Crispus, who was responsible for running the

synagogue.¹³ Indeed, it looks very likely that Crispus’ replacement, Sosthenes,¹⁴ was also converted to Jesus. His is an uncommon name and it appears, alongside Paul’s, as co-author of 1 Corinthians.¹⁵ No wonder the Jews were so incensed by the impact of Paul’s preaching.

When he was no longer allowed access to the synagogue, Paul decided to hold his meeting next door. The owner of the house, one Titius Justus (obviously a Gentile), is likely to have had the third name of Gaius and to be the man of that name mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:14 and Romans 16:23.

So Paul was provided with an ideal location, from which he could contact both Jewish and Gentile Corinthians. Indeed, ‘many believed and were baptized’.¹⁶

The church was growing apace. There were many reasons for confidence and buoyancy. Yet it appears that Paul was still low in spirits, uncertain and prone to depression. As John Pollock imagines the situation,

He would never win another Corinthian to Christ, see the sparkle of new life in a man’s eyes. And he dreaded the physical agony of another stoning or beating with rods; the desolation of being flung out again with winter now on them, the seas turbulent, and nowhere to take his stiff, aging joints but the mountain trails of the Peloponnese. He wanted to give up, stop preaching, take himself away to live quietly at peace, back to the Taurus, to Arabia, to anywhere.¹⁷

Then the Lord, who understood the pressures, the depression, the desire to opt out, spoke directly to Paul in a vision, rallying his spirits, guaranteeing much more fruit in Corinth, and lifting the fear of more physical battering at a time when he knew Paul had had enough. Paul would have cherished very precious memories of those Christians in Corinth; they became to him living proof of the faithfulness of a God who cares and encourages his wearied servants.

The rest of the time in Corinth seems to have been relatively straightforward, as Paul spent the time ‘teaching the word of God among them’,^[18] steadily building up the church, binding it together, extending its frontiers. There was a slight hiccup, when a new Roman proconsul took over the province—Gallio, brother-in-law of Seneca, Nero’s tutor and philosopher. The Jews glimpsed a chance to have Paul locked up and to put an end to this Christian menace. But Gallio knew how to keep his distance from Jewish trouble-makers, and Paul did not even have a charge to answer. If Sosthenes was by this time a Christian, he was the one to receive the beating for the name of Jesus. That must have been hard for Paul to watch, but certainly it would have bound them even closer together in the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings.

So Paul left Corinth after 18 months’ effective ministry, together with Aquila and Priscilla. He always looked back on his time in Corinth with great affection. He arrived feeling nothing but weakness; but he left having experienced the secret of all Christian ministry—that God’s power is made perfect in weakness.^[19] It is always difficult to leave a community of God’s people among whom we have been taught similarly deep lessons. It is very much like a bereavement, as though losing part of oneself. That is how Paul felt about the church at Corinth. The Christians there were part of him and, when he wrote to them, he wrote to brothers and sisters in Christ who had been a refreshment and an encouragement to him in times of real depression. God had said: ‘I have many people in this city’,^[20] and those many people were to Paul ‘the seal of my apostleship in the Lord’.^[21]

It was at Corinth that he learnt thoroughly the lesson which he uses to conclude the major teaching of this letter: ‘Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.’^[22]

The Corinthian correspondence

Because of his deep attachment to the Christians in Corinth, Paul was bound to put pen to paper when strange teachings began to divide the church. As C. K. Barrett says,

Many winds of doctrine blew into the harbours and along the streets of Corinth, and it must have been very difficult for young Christians to keep on a straight course.... Corinth would undoubtedly have received Christian visitors in addition to Paul and some of them preached the same gospel, others did not.... Some of those whom Paul had in mind indulged in speculative theology based on the themes of knowledge (*gnosis*) and wisdom (*sophia*).... It may well be right to see in Corinth an early form of that confluence of Hellenistic, Oriental, Jewish and Christian streams which makes up full-blown Gnosticism....

Paul was dealing with men who wished to be at the centre of, and to control, their own religion, and had not yet learned what it meant to walk by faith, not by sight....^[23]

There is full discussion in C. K. Barrett of the complex details within the correspondence between Paul and the Corinthian church. The most helpful guide through these intricacies is William Barclay.^[24] The basic fact to remember is that 1 and 2 Corinthians as we have them do not (by their own testimony) comprise the entire correspondence. Mention is made^[25] of a letter previous to 1 Corinthians. At the end of 2 Corinthians^[26] Paul talks of paying the Corinthians a *third* visit: the first is that described by Luke in Acts 18, but the second is unknown. In 2 Corinthians 7:8 Paul talks of another letter of such sternness that Paul almost wished he had never sent it. This cannot be 1 Corinthians, and the first nine chapters of 2 Corinthians are certainly not stern: indeed they are probably the most tender, warm and eirenic of all his human correspondence. This leaves 2 Corinthians 10–13 which, by his own admission, contain very traumatic material which could well be the material Paul wishes he had never despatched. This leaves us with the following possible sequence of events, as laid out by Barclay:

- i. The ‘Previous Letter’, which *may* be contained in 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1 (N.B. 6:13 runs very smoothly into 7:2).
- ii. ‘Chloe’s people’ (1 Cor. 1:11) bring to Paul at Ephesus news of division at Corinth.
- iii. 1 Corinthians chapters 1–4 were written in reply and Timothy is about to take it to Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17).
- iv. Three men (Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus: 1 Cor. 16:17) arrive with more news and a letter from Corinth: Paul immediately writes chapters 5 and 6 and pens chapters 7–16 in reply to this letter. Timothy then takes the whole of 1 Corinthians to Corinth.
- v. The situation gets worse and Paul makes a disastrous visit to Corinth after which things get even more painful for Paul (*cf.* 2 Cor. 2:1).
- vi. He then sends the ‘Severe Letter’ (2 Cor. 10–13) by the hands of Titus (2 Cor. 2:13; 7:13).
- vii. Paul is so worried that he cannot wait for Titus to return; he sets out to meet him in Macedonia (2 Cor. 7:5–13), and then writes 2 Corinthians 1–9, the ‘Letter of Reconciliation’.

1. The perfect church (1:1–9)

Before we look at Paul's description of the church at Corinth from God's perspective, it is worth taking a bird's-eye view of its main characteristics as they are shown in these two letters.

It was a large church—many Corinthians were converted to Christ. It was full of cliques, each following a different personality. Many Christians were very snobbish: at fellowship meals the rich kept to themselves, and the poor were left alone. There was very little church discipline: a lot of laxity was allowed, both in morals and in doctrine—an all-too-common combination. They were unwilling to submit to authority of any kind and the integrity of Paul's own apostleship was frequently questioned. There was a distinct lack of humility and of consideration for others, some being prepared to take fellow-Christians to court and others celebrating their new-found freedom in Christ without the slightest regard for the less robust consciences of fellow-believers. In general, they were very keen on the more dramatic gifts of the Spirit and were short on love rooted in the truth. This is the church Paul greets.

1. Paul's greeting to the church at Corinth (1:1–3)

Paul describes himself in almost the same way as at the beginning of Romans, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians: *i.e.* as an apostle commissioned by God. Thus from the outset he makes plain his apostolic calling to those at Corinth who questioned it.

The greeting fills out the conventional Greek and Hebrew words of welcome with specifically Christian content: instead of *chaire* (= greetings) Paul uses *charis* (= grace); and he takes the Hebrew *shālôm* and invests it with emphasis on Jesus Christ the Lord.

In verse 2, Paul uses a number of pungent phrases to describe the church at Corinth. On closer investigation, there seems to be a deliberate play on the root word *kalein* (= call)—a theme which is central to Paul's thinking, particularly in these opening paragraphs of the letter: 1:9, 'God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord'; 1:23–24, 'we preach Christ crucified, ... to those who are called ... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God'; 1:26, 'consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth'.

Clearly this sense of *calling* is uppermost in Paul's mind as he ponders the relationship between the Corinthian church and himself, and as he recollects the circumstances in which the Christian community came into being at Corinth. Fundamentally, he is conscious of God's initiative in his own call and in the call of the Christians at Corinth, both individually and corporately. He seems to be saying this: 'God called me to be an apostle, God called each one of you to be saints, to enjoy the fellowship of his Son, Jesus.' If God had not thus called, he would not have become an apostle and they would not have found Jesus Christ to be the wisdom and the power of God, let alone come to share in him and be his special people, his saints. This, almost self-conscious, harping on God's call would indicate that Paul's use of the word *ekklēsia* (literally 'a company of those called out') to describe the church at Corinth is also not accidental.

Thus God calls each individual by name, and a person responds by calling on the name of the Lord (*cf.* verse 2). The fact that these Corinthians, and countless others *in every place*, call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ is proof positive that God has already made his call sound clearly enough for them to hear and respond.

All those who thus hear God's call and respond are members of the *ekklēsia* of God. They have been set apart by God in that call, and are reserved for Jesus Christ (*sanctified in Christ Jesus*). There is as close a unity between such people *in every place* as there is between Paul and the Christians of Corinth in that single place.

Paul does not talk of 'my church', but of the *church of God*. He was as responsible for the birth and life of that church in Corinth as it is possible for any human to be: but it was *God's* church, not Paul's. We often speak too loosely of 'my church' or 'our church'. It is a healthy corrective to note Paul's example. Many problems in a church in fact revolve around a selfish possessiveness, by pastor and congregation, towards its life and activities. It also needs to be said that no individual Christian, or group of Christians, has any special claim to Jesus: he is *both their Lord and ours*.

For Paul himself there was probably no distinction in time between his call to be a saint, along with every other believer, and his call to be an apostle: the one included the other, the former being a calling he shared with others and the latter being something which set him apart from others.

A concise summary of what was involved in the unique apostleship entrusted to Paul, as to the original disciples of Jesus, can be found in *Gospel and Spirit*, a statement first published in 1977.^[1] This says: 'Through divine revelation and inspiration these men were authoritative spokesmen for, witnesses to and interpreters of God and his Son. Their personal authority as teachers and guides—authority bestowed and guaranteed by the risen Christ—was final, and no appeal away from what they said was allowable.'

When God called Paul from his bitter persecution of the Christian church, he called him into his apostolic ministry. That vocation was not a second call after the initial call. Each Christian is similarly called: our appointed ministry is part of what it means to be saved. It may take some time to discover it, certainly to slot into it; but nevertheless each Christian is called to serve.^[2]

Of course, Paul's call to be an apostle, though admittedly in many ways very different from that of the other apostles,^[3] was crucial in establishing his credentials in front of the Corinthian church when it was being harassed by others who styled themselves, not merely apostles, but far more authoritative and effective apostles than Paul.^[4] Paul found it necessary to ask himself searching and painful questions about his call to be an apostle. We may not have that particular struggle to face, but we need to remind ourselves that a call to salvation is necessarily a call to service.

Paul does not refer to the community of God's people at Corinth as *part* of the church, but as *the church of God* as it is at Corinth. Equally, in a letter almost certainly written later at Corinth, he talks of the church as it is in the house of Aquila and Priscilla.⁵ In other words, whether we are thinking of the Christians gathered in a geographical area or in someone's home, there is nothing lacking except numbers. The church as a whole is present, in microcosm. Indeed, there is good scriptural justification for seeing the church in someone's home as primary and working out from that basic unit.⁶

The presence of a person by the name of *Sosthenes* as co-writer with Paul of 1 Corinthians is intriguing. Although by no means an unknown name at the time, it is sufficiently uncommon for us to assume that this is the same Sosthenes who replaced Crispus as ruler of the synagogue in Corinth when the latter turned to Christ.⁷ The fact that Paul included Sosthenes without comment indicates that he was well known to the Christians at Corinth. The conversion to Christ of two leading officials in the Jewish community one after the other must have thrown them all into some disarray. A parallel situation emerged at Oxford University in the early 1960s in the heyday of the Humanist Society. Its president was converted to Christ, which led to an extraordinary general meeting of the Society. The person then elected was himself converted within a few weeks, thus necessitating another extraordinary general meeting. The Sosthenes affair should spur our faith in presenting the claim of Jesus Christ to those who seem most entrenched in the official opposition.

2. Paul's confidence in the church at Corinth (1:4–9)

The one fact most people have at their fingertips concerning the Corinthian church is that it was a mess—full of problems, sins, division, heresy. It was, in this sense, no different from any modern church. The church is a fellowship of sinners before it is a fellowship of saints. Even those churches which have glowing reputations are known all too well by their members and pastors to be full of weaknesses and sins. The sad thing is that dissatisfied church members will often naively think that another church in the area will somehow be better than the one they now attend. From this restlessness comes the common habit of church-swapping. Perhaps one of the best antidotes for this kind of malaise is to look again at what Paul says in 1:4–9 about the notoriously messy church at Corinth.

We need to register this primary truth—Paul looks at the Corinthian church as it is *in Christ* before he looks at anything else that is true of the church. That disciplined statement of faith is rarely made in local churches. The warts are examined and lamented, but often there is no vision of what God has already done in Christ. If the first nine verses of this letter were excised from the text, it would be impossible for any reader to come to anything but a fairly pessimistic view of the church at Corinth. The statements of faith, hope and love that occur at frequent intervals in the text would have no context; they would degenerate into pious dreams. For lack of the kind of vision spelt out in verses 4–9, the people of God today are, in many places, perishing: either going through the motions of being the church with no real expectation of significant growth into maturity, or desperately urging one another to more effort, more prayer, more faith and more activity—because those seem to be the right things.

If it is true that the church in the home or in a given area lacks nothing except numbers, then what Paul says of the church at Corinth *in Christ* is an accurate description of *every* church of God. His confidence in the church at Corinth is based on God's generosity and faithfulness.

i. The church is fully endowed with all the gifts of God's grace (4–7)

'The grace of God ... was given you' ... 'in every way you were enriched in him' ... 'you are not lacking in any spiritual gift'—three statements which speak of the lavish generosity of God towards these redeemed sinners at Corinth. It is important immediately to point out that these statements are about the church of God at Corinth, not about individual believers. If we are to know the fullness of God's blessing, if we are to experience all the gifts of his grace which are ours in Christ, it has to be together in fellowship. No individual Christian can claim to be 'not lacking in any spiritual gift'—as chapters 12 and 14 of 1 Corinthians make abundantly plain.

But the local church potentially *does* have every spiritual gift within its corporate life, and should prayerfully expect God to bring them into mature expression. In giving us his Son Jesus, God has given us all he has; he can give us no more; we have everything in him. If we are gradually to make these gifts a reality in our life together, we shall need to enter more fully into the richness of his grace; we shall also need to keep our eyes skinned for his *revealing* (7), his unveiling. Such a hope has its own inner incentive to move forward as those destined to be the bride of Christ, because it is then (and only then) that we shall enter into the full reality of all that is ours in Christ.

In talking of the gifts of God's grace,⁸ Paul specifically stresses that the church has been enriched *with all speech and all knowledge*. The two words here are *logos* and *gnōsis*, both bundles of dynamite in the early church. It is quite likely that Paul concentrates on these two clusters of gifts, because the Corinthians majored on them.⁹ There is also, without doubt, an early reference here to the pervasive teachings of Gnosticism; the second-century heretical hotchpotch (already discernible in the middle of the first century), about which it is still difficult to be precise, but which created a spiritual élite who claimed alone to possess true knowledge, alone to be able to put it into words and alone to have proper authority to guide and control the life of the church.¹⁰

Paul is adamant that God has fully endowed the whole congregation with these gifts of knowledge and speech, and no doubt Paul is thinking of particular friends at Corinth with different gifts. On the speaking side he would have included such gifts as prophecy, teaching, preaching, evangelism, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues, and any use of the gift of speech which contributes to the building up of the church. As far as knowledge is concerned, the church as a body has access to all the wisdom, insight, discernment and truth which it needs:¹¹ it needs no special gurus to bring it to

them.¹²

Two important points are made (somewhat cryptically) about preaching in the rather difficult phrase in verse 6: *even as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you*. The meaning probably is this: as Paul himself proclaimed ‘the unsearchable riches of Christ’¹³ to the church of God at Corinth during those busy 18 months, so they began to appreciate and gradually to experience the richness of their inheritance as children of God. In other words, they were enriched in proportion to the quality and the clarity of Paul’s preaching. The two points here about preaching, therefore, are these. First, the privilege and the responsibility of the preacher is to uncover and explain all that is ours in Christ; secondly, bare preaching is not adequate—it must be confirmed (more literally ‘secured’) in the lives of the hearers, and that requires the work of God’s Spirit,¹⁴ bringing conviction, illumination and faith.

The church is thus fully endowed with all the gifts of God’s grace. These need to be discovered, explained and appropriated. For this to happen, preaching must testify to the unsearchable riches of Christ. Such preaching requires the power of the Spirit to secure those riches in the life of the Christian community.

ii. The church will be completely sustained by the faithfulness of God (8–9)

Not only is Paul very positive about the present resources of the church of God at Corinth; he is also full of confidence in the Lord for its future. Whatever ups and downs it might face, Paul is sure of the faithfulness of God: he has called them into the fellowship of his Son, he will *sustain* (this is the same word as in verse 6 = ‘make secure’) them to the end. The phrase in verse 9 (*koinōnia* of Jesus Christ) could mean either that the church is *the fellowship* of Jesus Christ, *i.e.* the company of people who call Jesus Lord and belong to him; or that God calls us to share in his Son, Jesus. The latter interpretation is more likely, especially as that truth is picked up later to pinpoint the sinfulness of division on the grounds of allegiance to those who are simply ‘servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each’.¹⁵

If we have been called, on the initiative of God himself, to share in his Son, Jesus Christ, then God will not abandon us or go back on his promises. That is the force of the word *pistos* (= *faithful*). We can totally depend on God: he is not a man, he cannot deny himself, he will keep his word. The church is his responsibility: he is committed to ‘the perfecting of the saints’.¹⁶

God’s terminus is not merely the end of each individual’s lifespan, which he certainly guards with personal care, but *the day of our Lord Jesus Christ* (8). If we take the teaching on this subject in this letter, we discover that this day marks the full disclosure (literally ‘unveiling’) both of Jesus Christ as he really is, and of the true quality of our service for Christ (3:10–15), as well as the inner purposes and motives of our hearts (4:5). It is a day, anticipated with joy in each celebration of the Lord’s Supper (11:26), when the dead in Christ shall be raised (15:23, 52) to an incorruptible life in what Paul calls ‘a spiritual body’ (15:44). It is a day, therefore, for which Paul longs in the prayer at the end of his letter (16:22): ‘*Maran atha*’ = ‘Our Lord, come!’

God’s faithfulness extends to that day, and beyond it into the fullness of eternity. He will keep his people *guiltless* in that day: *i.e.* when the secrets of men’s hearts are disclosed and we might have had legitimate fear of being finally found guilty before him. God will ensure that absolutely no charge or accusation is laid against his people, whether by human beings or by Satan, the great ‘accuser of the brethren’.¹⁷ On that day it will be plain to all that it is God who justifies, and that those whom he has justified he has also, in the selfsame act, glorified.¹⁸ It is Jesus who matters on that day; it is his day; he calls the tune; he determines the issues. Because we have been called to share in Jesus, we share in his supremacy on that day. We are not under judgment for sin on that day. If anything, the New Testament teaches that we shall exercise judgment along with Jesus Christ.¹⁹

If we have been called to share in Jesus, let us abide in him²⁰—the only way of gradually becoming like him. When we have become like him through the grace of God continuously at work in us, it will be impossible for any guilt, or even cause for guilt, to exist. To such a radical purpose God has committed himself in calling us into fellowship with his Son.

The practical implications of this ‘glorious hope’ in terms of our vision for the local church are relatively straightforward. It must surely mean that we are unreservedly committed to the church of God where he has placed us; that we are unhesitatingly confident about God’s desire and ability to make his church in that place like Jesus Christ; that we are uncompromisingly certain about the call for us to be holy, as he is holy. It is these implications which Paul works out in the rest of this letter.

2. Cliques at Corinth (1:10–17)

Paul's high view of the church—at Corinth and in general—pinpoints the sadness he must have felt at hearing news of division amongst the Corinthian Christians: *It has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarrelling among you, my brethren* (11). All the indications are that Paul found this news extremely painful. He knew enough about the realities of local church life not to be surprised. But still he was deeply hurt. This is shown by the double reference to *brethren* in verses 10 and 11. The fact of Christian brotherhood is the ground of his appeal for unity: if Jesus Christ has by his grace made them one and if they share in him, then they must 'become what they are': *I appeal to you ... by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...*

What exactly caused this division at Corinth? We can see both explicit and implicit causes in verses 12–17. Obviously personality-cults were emerging, taking three major figures in the early church as their focus, almost certainly with absolutely no encouragement from either Paul or Apollos or Cephas (Peter). But there may well be other clues to the trouble in the way Paul argues in verses 13–17: for example, it looks as if baptism was becoming an issue. There may well have been also some incipient heresy separating 'the Jesus of history' from 'the Christ of faith'.^[1]

Whatever the causes of these developing cliques, the situation had become one of strife; *quarrelling* (11) is too weak a translation. The different stages on the road to division are worth spelling out. In 1 Corinthians 11:18–19 Paul refers again to these 'divisions'. There he deprecates the fact that inevitable 'factions' have been allowed to sunder the body of Christ and to produce 'strife'. In other words, there are bound to be different emphases and ideas within the local church: the word translated 'factions' in 11:19 is *haireseis* (from which we get the word 'heresy'), and it has the root-meaning of 'choose'. All Christians select different aspects of the truth at different times for particular emphasis. Such selection inevitably brings the focus away from other strands of truth on to one or two specific matters. That is allowable, if not necessary, so long as what is being done is recognized for what it is, *i.e.* selectivity. When a Christian, or a group of Christians, becomes totally absorbed with one aspect of the truth to the neglect, exclusion or even denial of the whole truth as it is in Jesus, then the danger-point has been reached. That is when selectivity becomes heresy and it can be readily seen who is 'genuine' (11:19) and who is false.

Paul is concerned that the church at Corinth should learn the right way of dealing with what we have called 'selectivity'. When a few Christians begin to stress one aspect of the truth, they need to be aware of what they are doing and the rest must refuse to react negatively. The Corinthians had allowed such emphases to develop into cliques, who were refusing to share together in fellowship. Selectivity had produced splinter-groups (the word translated *dissensions* is *schismata*, from which we get 'schism', and which literally means to 'cut apart'). Now there was open strife between the different groups.

1. The four groups

The major problem was that these cliques had all managed to take their eyes off the Lord Jesus Christ. Each rallied support around one personality or another.^[2] Each had its own slogans. It is important to understand the nature of each clique, because they all recur regularly in the church. In fact, it is interesting (though sad) to discover that Clement of Rome (writing about AD 95), talks about the same cliques and divisions at Corinth in his day—though he does not mention the 'Christ-party'. So, forty years on, the trouble had not been eradicated. This indicates that we should expect and be on our guard against these divisive tendencies at all times. Let us look at each group.

i. The Paul-party

'I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel' (4:15). Obviously there were many at Corinth who were for this fundamental reason very strongly attached to Paul. He had brought them to faith and they were for ever in his debt. The total transformation God had effected in their lives, from the darkness of utter paganism to the marvellous light of the gospel, made them doubly grateful for Paul's labours on their behalf. So whatever Paul said, or was imagined to have said, these folk accepted *verbatim*. They probably regarded everyone else as second-rate anyway. True, Paul had been gone for several years now, but his memory lived on. There is probably no pastor of a church with any history behind it who has not discovered a Paul-party of this kind within his congregation. They have taken their eyes off the Lord in the passage of time and are consequently always harking back to 'the good old days'.

Barclay suggests that the Paul-party emphasized Christian freedom and the end of the law. The fact that Paul specifically mentions personalities, rather than matters of theology, suggests that this interpretation is unlikely. Very often what happens in a local church today is that differences grow around personalities (either from within the church fellowship or from the wider church) and then become articulated around matters of doctrinal dispute. There may well be genuine theological disagreement, but the 'strife' emerges because personal relationships are not good. When the love of God is truly controlling such relationships within a church, areas of disagreement find their proper perspective and do not necessitate 'strife', let alone 'schism'.^[3]

So-called 'clashes of personality' often, on analysis, are nothing much more than a failure, or even a refusal, to let God's love change us in our attitudes to one another. We allow theological differences (instead of the love of God) to determine the quality, openness and depth of our relationships. For example, our western tendency to be detached and objective in discussing a situation enables us to analyse differences in the church in what we believe to be a careful, biblical way. We can pursue such a course sitting in the same room as those with whom we disagree—and never meet one another as people, let alone as brothers and sisters in Christ. We part company convinced that the *real* problem is theological, when in fact we have managed, by our very detachment, to prevent the love of God from bringing harmony

and mutual acceptance. We then declare that theological differences are the cause of the schism between us.

This seemed to be classically the case over the division which emerged in the church in the '60s and '70s over charismatic renewal in Britain. Fifteen years of doctrinal disagreement preceded any committed attempt on a national level to build loving relationships. Out of the doctrinal debate came division; out of the bridge-building between people came a marked degree of mutual trust and acceptance.^[4] If (as Paul says in 1 Cor. 13) love is of fundamental and pre-eminent importance, then it is imperative to build and foster good relationships in which we can discuss theological differences in the love of God.

The Paul-party almost certainly emerged in reaction to others in Corinth forming groups around the other figures mentioned here. Until the others emerged, everyone would have presumably supported Paul. In other words, those supporting Paul reacted in kind, forming their own group. It is so easy to respond to fleshly (as Paul calls it in 3:1–4) behaviour in the church with equally fleshly methods, instead of taking up God's armour in the power of the Spirit.

ii. The Apollos-party

Although there is relatively little information to hand about Apollos, what we do know gives us a clear portrait and provides a satisfactory, though speculative, explanation for his becoming the focus for a developing clique at Corinth. According to Acts 18:24–19:7, Apollos came from Alexandria in Egypt, probably the most respected and creative university city of the Mediterranean. Tarsus was 'no mean city', but it was no Alexandria: when Apollos came to Corinth with his intellectual ability, his fine speaking, his expository skill in the Old Testament Scriptures, his accurate teaching about Jesus, his fervent enthusiasm, his powerful confrontation of the Jews in public and his bold preaching—it is no wonder that he began to attract a personal following.

Aquila and Priscilla took him under their wing in Ephesus and carefully re-directed his ministry.^[5] Apollos then had an invaluable ministry with young believers in Christ. Luke particularly remarks that 'he greatly helped those who through grace had believed',^[6] both in his proclamation of Jesus as Messiah and by giving them more thorough teaching to strengthen Christians in their encounters with hostile Jews.^[7]

Some feel that Apollos, with such a background, might have been unwittingly responsible for introducing something of an intellectual élite into the Corinthian church. Young Christians certainly can be sucked into a personality cult around the gifts and graces of impressive speakers, particularly those with a genuinely helpful teaching ministry. Apollos probably did not stay that long in Corinth, but it was long enough for some to start comparing him favourably with Paul, who did not lag behind in fervour or mastery of the Old Testament Scriptures or intellectual ability, but who by his own admission did not display great eloquence.^[8] It is certainly not necessary to blame Apollos for intellectualizing Christianity, as suggested by Barclay. At the same time, when a group of Christians begins to take their teaching only from their chosen guru, schism is not far off.^[9]

iii. The Peter-party

It seems to be generally agreed that 'the Cephas-group represented Jewish Christianity in some form'.^[10] Peter may have visited Corinth himself, which would explain the emergence of such a clique. Some of his followers may also have visited Corinth and pushed the party-line. There is ample evidence of legalistic tendencies in the church at Corinth, particularly in the debate about the rights and wrongs of eating food offered to idols in chapters 8–10. We only have to read the account (in Gal. 2) of Paul's clash with Peter about food laws to realize that the 'kosher' issue may well have continued to be a smouldering fire between the apostle to the Gentiles and the one 'entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised'.^[11] From the very beginning there had been amongst Corinthian Jews significant conversions to Jesus as the Christ and the temptation to return to legalism must have been very strong, especially in the notorious profligacy of Corinthian society.

The first flush of new life in the Spirit can often give way to a very negative and restrictive legalism, particularly in the family life of those converted from rank paganism to the liberty of the gospel. When the fire of enthusiasm dies down, a 'safe' way emerges, which is often the letter without the Spirit. This tendency reflects our natural desire to have clear guide-lines for faith and behaviour, rather than to walk the tightrope of obedience to the Spirit between the two extremes of licence and legalism.

There are today many examples of a genuine renewal in the Spirit sliding into this kind of legalism, in which certain teachers emphasize the importance of particular outward patterns of behaviour, of strict duties towards the church, and of specific structures for pastoral oversight. Many Christians feel secure in such strait-jackets. It even reaches the stage where real spirituality is assessed by such outward evidence.^[12] It is arguable that uncritical calls for the church to return to primitive apostolic practice as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles represent a similar 'back to Jerusalem' tendency. What is clear is that we need constantly to be vigilant against any reduction of what it is to be Christian to a series of rules or prohibitions: 'You must do this. You must not do that ...'

iv. The Christ-party

At first sight the existence of a group with the watchword, 'I belong to Christ', seems strange and unlikely.^[13] Experience today, however, would strongly underline the timeless accuracy of Paul's words here. Wherever the Spirit of God is at work, there always emerges a group of folk who sit very lightly indeed to any human leadership. The very presence of three cliques at Corinth, each paying excessive attention to an individual leader, would have been likely to produce a fourth group to whom all this 'hero-worship' would have been anathema. With a strong dose of anti-authoritarianism built into them, they would have taken the very plausible line: 'Who needs leaders anyway? Christ is our leader. He is the head of the body. We depend on him alone and we go straight to him. He tells us what to do and, when we wait on him, he lets

us know his will.’

If all the other three groups had (and have) plausibility, this group is the most difficult to evaluate. Their emphasis and their language are usually above reproach and their ‘hot line’ to God can be very intimidating. The net result of their presence in the church is that most others feel spiritually inadequate: ‘We do not get clear messages from the Lord; we have no comparable sense of immediacy in prayer; we cannot match such unswerving certainty about the will of the Lord.’ There is always a faint, but discernible, air of spiritual superiority when members of this group are present. It is not easy to cope with comments such as ‘The Lord has told me that ...’.

Often the psychological basis for this kind of emphasis lies in a mixture of strong individualism and latent insecurity. This leads to an inner resistance to being told what to do and manifests itself in the need to bolster uncertainty with statements expressing the validity of strong subjective experiences. Such people hold that their experiences cannot be evaluated, let alone shown to be wrong, because they are above analysis. They maintain that it is neither relevant nor right to evaluate such experiences, because they are not up for discussion.

There can be little doubt that this Christ-party would have given considerable impetus to Gnostic tendencies at Corinth. Whereas the Apollos-group could have been responsible for introducing an intellectual élite into the Corinthian church, this group would have readily spawned a super-spiritual élite. Both tendencies have stayed with the Christian church down the centuries. It is conceivable that this Christ-party was a spill-over from the mystery-religions of Corinth, with their emphasis on spiritual experiences which bypass the mind completely.

The interesting point about such a Christ-party is that they tend (sooner rather than later) to hive off and form their own ‘church’, mainly because they come eventually to feel that the average local church is not spiritual enough. This in itself may account for the fact that Clement of Rome does not mention the Christ-party at Corinth, when he does refer to the other three parties, in his epistle about the Corinthian church written in AD 95.

However inevitable such distinctive groupings may have been at Corinth, Paul is not prepared to ignore their potential divisiveness. He makes a very strong appeal for unity in verse 10 and then proceeds to give three powerful arguments against disunity in verses 13–17. The appeal contains three words with a political flavour—*agree, dissension and be united*. The first word means, literally, ‘say the same thing’ and is found on the first-century gravestone of a married couple, indicating, not the ‘yes-man’ mentality, but working together in a harmonious relationship. Paul believes and urges that these four groups should work together. Each has an important emphasis and that emphasis must be brought fully and unreservedly into the life of the Christian community. All must be on the look-out for imminent schism, refusing to allow differences of emphasis to produce division.

Paul was keen, in other words, on harmony—not unison. He believed that it was not merely possible for Christians of many different kinds to live together in harmony, but that this was their calling from God. Such mutual recognition, giving each person the freedom to express his convictions and insights, would lead to a restoration of true unity *in the same mind and the same judgment* (*nous and gnōmē*).¹⁴

2. Focus on Jesus Christ

Paul’s arguments against disunity all focus on Jesus Christ and it needs to be said uncompromisingly that both then in Corinth and generally today division and disunity arise because the eyes of Christians are elsewhere than on Jesus Christ. These arguments revolve around the wholeness of Christ, the cross of Christ and the Lordship of Christ.

i. The wholeness of Christ

Is Christ divided? or, literally, ‘Has Christ been parcelled out?’ (13). Paul is asking the Corinthians, with all their division, ‘Do you suppose that there are fragments of Christ that can be distributed among different groups? If you have Christ, you have all of him. Jesus cannot be divided.’ We cannot have half a person, as though we said: ‘Please come in, but leave your legs outside.’ This, incidentally, throws light on such common phrases as ‘wanting more of Christ’. It cannot be: we should rather be allowing Christ to have more of us. We are the disintegrated ones whom Christ is gradually making whole, so that we become more like him—integrated and entire. The same argument applies to wanting more of the Holy Spirit. If he is personal, a Person, than we either have him living within us or we do not; again, our desire and prayer should be for the Holy Spirit to have more of us.

ii. The cross of Christ

Paul’s second argument against disunity is, if anything, even more vivid: *Was Paul crucified for you?* (13). He is challenging the Corinthians to drop their personality-cults and to fix their attention once again on ‘Jesus Christ and him crucified’. That was the focus of his message when he first preached in Corinth (2:2). That was the message which had attracted them from the outset. They owed their brand-new life to Jesus Christ. He it was who had died for their sins and brought them forgiveness and cleansing—not Apollos, or Peter, or Paul. They knew the reality of being ransomed and changed. They were indebted to Jesus Christ, whichever group they espoused now.

Whenever Christians give their allegiance to any human personality, such as a gifted preacher or pastor, they have taken their eyes off Jesus Christ and there will inevitably be disunity. Jesus is the only one who can unite men and women and he does so through his cross, because we can come to God only *via* the cross of Christ and the ground there is level: all are equal at the cross. We never move on from the cross. When we do, we move from the place of reconciliation—with God and with others.¹⁵

This explains the importance of the Lord’s Supper as a sacrament of this reconciliation. To be continually reminded of the cross in this way is one of the healthy results of regularly sharing in the service of Holy Communion. When faced with the fact of disunity in the Christian church today, it seems odd to many Christians that this particular service should be seen

by some as the *last* focus for unity, rather than the first. Some Christians argue that *not* being able to share together at the Lord's Table is the penalty we pay for our disunity and that we can do so only when we are more fully united. We would argue strongly that reconciliation and unity between Christians is the *fruit* of the atoning sacrifice of Christ at Calvary, and that the service of Holy Communion is therefore where we *begin* to demonstrate that unity which is God's gift to us through the reconciling work of his Son. To suggest that we have to work towards visible unity *before* we can share together in the Lord's Supper looks dangerously like adding our good works to the grace of God enacted at Calvary. We all come together to the Lord's Table as sinners redeemed by his blood; we there acknowledge the disunity caused through our sin and guilt, then gratefully and joyfully celebrate our unity in forgiveness and cleansing. There is no single truth more eloquent or productive of true unity between Christians than the cross of Christ.

iii. The Lordship of Christ

This argument against disunity is subsumed in the third rhetorical question in verse 13: *Were you baptized in the name of Paul?* To be baptized in (*eis*, literally 'into') the name of someone was to have one's life signed over to that person, to come under his authority and to be at his beck and call. Paul makes the self-evident point that the Corinthians had, in baptism, become the possession of Jesus Christ—and of nobody else. He was clearly very sensitive to the possibility of people regarding themselves as his own disciples. That was what happened to the people baptized by John the Baptist.

Paul was determined (like John [16](#)) that he should decrease and that Jesus should increase in the affections and loyalties of the believers.

It seems likely that Paul was actually addressing a situation in Corinth, where baptism *per se* was assuming exaggerated importance. He is certainly very keen to play down the importance of the one who performs the ceremony: *I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius* (14). The last thing Paul wants is for anyone to talk as if he was baptized in the name of Paul (15). From the outset of his ministry, therefore, it would appear that Paul left to others the actual taking of baptisms. He was well aware of the personality-cults that so easily arise around baptism. Still today we have people who talk, with a large amount of ignorance, as though the identity of the baptizer is important.

If Paul *had* baptized all those converted through his ministry, there would have been room for very great misunderstanding. He seems actually to have forgotten precisely whom he did baptize at Corinth; his memory has to be jogged in order to recall *the household of Stephanas*. [17](#)

Although, therefore, it is correct to say that Paul plays down baptism in terms of his own ministry (verse 17: *Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel*), it is important to underline the significance of baptism as the third lynchpin for Paul's plea for unity amongst the Christians of Corinth. He recognizes the foundational significance for every believer of his or her baptism. He takes each Christian back to that sacrament and he rams home the point that this was no empty ceremony, but that it indicated a total dedication to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. They now all belong to him, not to Apollos or to Peter or to Paul. For Paul it is the deep meaning of baptism that counts, not the manner in which the sacrament is administered or the person who performs it. He stresses the distinctive nature of the baptized life, and this would seem pastorally to be the necessary emphasis today in continuing debates about baptism.

On these three grounds—the wholeness of Christ, the cross of Christ and the Lordship of Christ—Paul appeals to the Christians at Corinth to express their God-given unity in Jesus Christ. We, like Paul, are under orders *to preach the gospel* (17), and so to preach it that in no way do we detract from the cross of Christ. It is very easy to do the latter, notably when we pander to the wisdom of the world. And this leads into Paul's first main theme: true and false wisdom.