

I Corinthians and the Issue of Divisions

Paul's founding of the church at Corinth is described in some detail in Acts 18:1-17. Certain details within the letter accord with Luke's account of Paul's initial visit to the city, including the conversion of Crispus (1:14; cf. Acts 18:8), Paul's contact with Priscilla and Aquila (16:19; cf. Acts 18:2) and the fact that he undertook manual work in the city (4:12; cf. Acts 18:3). Furthermore, references to two datable events in Acts indicate that the church was established in Corinth around 50-51 CE. Luke remarks that Paul met Priscilla and Aquila shortly after they were expelled from Rome by Claudius (49 CE; Acts 18:2), while Gallio, the Roman proconsul of Achaia, before whom Paul was brought by the Jews (Acts 18:12-17) was in office during 50-51 CE according to an inscription found in Delphi. These two external dates span the period of eighteen months that were spent by Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:11, 18). I Corinthians also presupposes an elapse of time since Paul's departure from the city, and he states explicitly in the letter that it was written from Ephesus in the spring before Pentecost (16:8-9). Again, according to the chronology of Acts, Paul made his base in Ephesus two or three years after his departure from Corinth (19:8-10), suggesting that the letter was written around 53-55 CE.

Divisions in Corinth

Paul had clearly been absent long enough for new problems to arise within the Corinthian community. Not only had they written to him seeking advice on certain issues (I Cor. 7:1), but he states that he had received a report from 'Chloe's people', probably members of her household, that there were serious divisions within the community (1:11; 11:18). These divisions are the subject matter of the first main section of the letter (I Cor. 1-4), particularly in the third chapter which will now be discussed in some detail.

To place the third chapter in context, it must be read in the light of Paul's remarks in I Cor. 1:10-12 where the central theme of the letter is set out: 'Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions (*schismata*) among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose'. He then continues, 'Each of you says, "I belong to Paul", or "I belong to Apollos", or "I belong to Cephas", or "I belong to Christ"' (1:12).

This verse may provide some insights into the nature and origins of the divisions within the Corinthian congregation. It is possible that the slogans outlined in 1:12 reflect four factions whose allegiance to different leaders (Paul, Apollos, Cephas, Christ) may also have arisen because of the scattering of the congregation in different house churches. It is difficult, however, on the basis of the evidence presented in the letter, to draw a clear picture of what lies behind these so-called party claims. The reference to Cephas, for example, has led some scholars to search for clues in the letter that Peter actually visited Corinth, although the evidence in question is not conclusive (particularly the reference in 9:5 to Cephas, like other apostles, being accompanied by his wife; cf. 3:10).

Even more ambiguous is the fourth slogan, 'I belong to Christ', which may derive from a group laying exclusive claim to Christ as their leader; the inclusion of this slogan in the list does nevertheless suggest that the named leaders were not the instigators of the divisions (as has been claimed for Cephas representing a conservative form of Jewish Christianity). Even in the case of Apollos, for whom there is stronger evidence that there was a group claiming allegiance to him, Paul speaks positively of his ministry. There is, for example, no indication of tension between them when Paul describes Apollos as his co-worker (3:5-9), nor when he states that, despite Apollos' unwillingness, Paul did urge him to visit Corinth once again (16:12). It is possible that Apollos himself was reluctant to return to the city because he did not want to give some the opportunity to set him up as a rival to Paul.

All this suggests that Paul himself was being subjected to criticism, if not opposition, from within the church. Indeed, the slogan 'I belong to Paul' makes no sense unless it is understood as the claim of a particular group loyal to Paul but who form only one segment of the Corinthian congregation. Paul explicitly seeks to re-establish his own apostolic style and authority in the fourth chapter (4:6-21), but, as we will see, subtle hints of this can already be detected in the preceding chapter. Therefore, despite Paul's lack of clear-cut information about the individual characteristics of these various groups, it is evident from the letter that factionalism, arrogance and divided loyalties were a serious issue in Corinth. The slogans listed in 1:12, and repeated in 3:4, indicate that the divisions included confrontations between groups claiming personal allegiance to particular figures, especially Paul and Apollos.

The existence of an Apollos faction is given some substance from the text itself (especially in 3:3-4), but it may also provide some important clues as to what underlies Paul's argument about 'wisdom' (*sophia*) in this first major section of the letter (1:17-3:23). Earlier New Testament scholarship sought to demonstrate that Paul's emphasis on 'wisdom' in I Corinthians formed a response to Gnostic ideas about knowledge, the kind of privileged knowledge or wisdom which enabled adherents to attain a higher insight into reality, but which, at the same time, led them to disparage those who lacked it.

The more recent shift away from the Gnostic hypothesis has largely been the result of the question of dating the extant Gnostic texts. Nevertheless, there is also now a growing recognition that the terms 'knowledge' (*gnōsis*) and 'wisdom' (*sophia*) were in widespread use by other groups or systems during the first century CE. It is clear, for example, that Paul can use the term *sophia* in chapters 1-2 to denote the possession of exalted knowledge, but also for the ability to express that knowledge through eloquent speech or rhetorical gifts (technique of persuasion) (1:7, 19-20; 2:1, 4-5, 13). The significance of this feature for understanding Paul's argument in chapters 1-3 has been greatly illuminated by recent works on rhetoric, in particular by Duane Litfin who has demonstrated that the most common use of the term *sophia* in the Graeco-Roman world was to denote rhetoric. Furthermore, such possession of 'wisdom' did not simply point to an orator's technical skill of speech but connoted that person's social status and authority.

How does all this relate to the divisions in Corinth? According to Acts 18:24 and 28 Apollos was a learned Jew from Alexandria, an 'eloquent man (*anēr logios*), well-versed in the scriptures'. If the group loyal to Apollos in Corinth was won over by his eloquence, his impressive rhetorical skills, this could account for Paul's rebuke of those who over-valued the importance of 'eloquent wisdom' (1:17: *en sophia logou*, literally: 'in the wisdom of the word') or 'lofty words' (2:1). They may have been attempting to play off Apollos against Paul with a view to their status as 'wise men', even in competition with popular Graeco-Roman philosophers (note how Paul states in 2:1 that he did not preach to them with polished rhetoric). This then led to the kind of factionalism and boasting that set the Corinthians firmly on the level of human wisdom (3:1-4).

Paul reacts negatively to those in Corinth who elevated rhetorical skills, the 'wisdom' of human speech, as the key marker in Christian proclamation; this emphasis on slick presentation, he claims, misses the real character of divine wisdom and, in particular, diminishes its substance (1:24, 30). God, declares Paul, has revealed another kind of wisdom that subverts the wisdom of this world - and that wisdom is Christ crucified. As a result, all human values and perceptions of the world, 'the wisdom of this age', are turned upside down and have to be re-evaluated in the light of the cross. What Paul therefore preaches is a redefinition of wisdom as Christ crucified, and he insists that the identity of the community must be shaped with reference to this message. This also helps to explain the structure of Paul's argument in chapters 1-3: the emphasis on Christ crucified as the embodiment of divine wisdom (1:18-2:5) is Paul's theological response to the Corinthians' divisiveness, caused by their misplaced confidence in human wisdom (as outlined at both ends of the section in 1:10-17 and 3:1-5).

Spiritual Maturity (3:1-4)

Paul further explains the true nature of the wisdom of God in the section leading up to chapter 3. There are two aspects of Paul's language in this section that cast significant light on his argument. In the first place, he chooses to explain divine wisdom with the aid of apocalyptic categories expressed through contrasts. Divine wisdom, he states, is of an entirely different order from the wisdom of 'this age'. This wisdom has already been decreed before the ages, and it remains 'secret and hidden' (2:7). It is not an esoteric body of knowledge that can be acquired through human means (2:9, 16), but a divine mystery manifested in the cross and 'revealed' through the agency of the Spirit (2:9-10). The death of Jesus, according to Paul, initiates a new apocalyptic age. Secondly, it is likely that when Paul states in chapter 2 that this wisdom is being revealed among 'the mature' (2:6) and 'the spiritual' (2:14), he is drawing on, and making ironic use of, the religious vocabulary of the Corinthians. They viewed themselves as the recipients of the revelation of the Spirit and as being in the possession of more than ordinary natural life (cf. 2:14).

The reversal of the Corinthians' self-proclaimed status as 'spiritual' and 'mature' is set out in the starkest of terms in 3:1: 'And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people (*pneumatikoi*), but rather as people of the flesh (*sarkinoi*), as infants in Christ'. What Paul is saying is that their divisiveness in fact

disqualifies their claim to be 'mature' and 'spiritual'. The test of whether the Corinthians are truly 'spiritual' is whether the Spirit has formed within them 'the mind of Christ' (2:16). In the context of this letter, this can only be the mind of the crucified Christ. Divine wisdom or spiritual knowledge is therefore characterized by love, unity and humility. For this reason Paul tells them that their present conduct is 'of the flesh', because it is determined by their very human patterns of behaviour such as self-interest and squabbling.

This is not to deny that they have been given the Spirit, but they behave like 'infants in Christ' (3:1) who can only take milk and are not ready to cope with solid food (3:2). This was a well-known metaphor in antiquity for religious and philosophical instruction. Philo, for example, uses the image of milk/solid food to denote spiritual progression and insight: 'But seeing that for infants (*nēpioi*) milk is food, but for the mature (*teleioi*) wheaten bread, there must also be soul nourishment, such as is milk-like suited to the time of childhood... and such as is adapted to grown men in the shape of instructions leading the way through wisdom and temperance and all virtue' (*Agric.* 9). The term 'infants in Christ' in I Corinthians 3:1 is of course set in direct contrast to 'spiritual' (3:1) rather than 'mature', which suggests that his call is not only for maturity and growth from infants to adults but of a change of attitude. By saying all this, Paul implicitly asserts his own authority over the Corinthians, since he presents himself here as a 'parent' who knows what nourishment is best for them.

Now Paul's reference in verse 3 to the Corinthians' present situation brings him back to the issue of divisions in the church. They fail to be controlled by the Spirit because they have formed themselves into factions and align themselves with particular leaders; this time Apollos and Paul are the only figures mentioned.

Paul and Apollos as Servants of God (3:5-9)

Now that Paul has returned to the subject of party divisions in Corinth, he develops another line of argument against factionalism, this time focused on the theme of unity in leadership. The remaining sections of the chapter demonstrate why it is unnecessary to place one particular leader or minister on a pedestal or to set that leader against another. Their work will be assessed by God not through human praise. These themes are discussed through the use of corporate metaphors,

which shift effortlessly from the image of God's field (3:5-9) to God's building (3:10-15) to God's temple (3:16-17).

Once again it must be noted that there is nothing in this section to imply that Paul and Apollos were in competition with one another or that they encouraged the divisions in Corinth. In fact what Paul does at this point is apply another reversal of socio-cultural values. From the perspective of 'this age', to be a servant represents an inferior social status (nothing more than a manual labourer), but from the perspective of the new age marked, God's servants are his agents who share a common purpose (3:8; literally 'are one' [neuter]). Furthermore, in contrast to the customs of Graeco-Roman society (as Andrew Clarke has shown), the Corinthians are encouraged not to focus on Paul and Apollos as individual personalities, but on their tasks. For what is emphasized in this section is that the church belongs to God. Paul, as the founder of the Corinthian congregation, is the one who planted, whereas Apollos, who came to Corinth later and through whom others may have been converted (cf. Acts 18:24-19:1), has the different task of giving water to the plant. Both are depicted as human instruments who collaborate in God's larger purpose, because it is he who gives the growth and brings 'the field' to life. In the light of this common purpose it makes no sense to set one 'servant' in competition with the other. They will receive their reward (or wages) - an image that Paul does not develop here - through God's assessment of their labour. And yet, there is an undercurrent throughout this passage of Paul's assertion of his own authority. Those who have attached themselves to Apollos are reminded that Paul was responsible for establishing the congregation in Corinth (cf. 3:10; 4:15; 9:2), which gives him the right to act as a parent offering them advice on spiritual nourishment.

Building on the Foundation (3:10-15)

The end of verse 9 switches to a new metaphor, that of a building; this illustrates further the purpose of leadership, according to Paul (3:10-15), and it is an image that he then extends with reference to the temple (3:16-17). Once again, as in the previous image, the emphasis is on its corporate nature (note also the use of the first-person plural throughout this section). The new element introduced with the aid of this image is that a foundation must be laid before a building can be erected. Paul takes the opportunity again to establish his authority, for he (not Apollos or any other leader) is the master builder who has laid the necessary foundation before letting out the building work to subcontractors. In other words, everyone

else who exercises leadership in the community must build on the foundation laid by him. Interestingly Paul here uses the word 'skilled' to characterize his own task; the underlying Greek term translated as 'skilled' is *sophos* ('wise'), which is probably intended to possess a double meaning. Paul's work in Corinth was not only skilled but was in accordance with God's wisdom rather than human wisdom.

Paul then issues two warnings. First, he warns against trying to lay a different foundation from that of Christ (3:11) which, in this context, must denote Christ crucified, the foundational preaching set out clearly by Paul earlier in the letter (1:23; 2:2). Secondly, he warns of the dangers of building with worthless materials (3:12-15), because the building of the structure, or the community, must conform to the pattern of the foundation. The quality of this building work will also be exposed; it will be tested by the fire of God's judgement. Paul lists six different materials here, possibly in descending order of their value: gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, and straw. They can certainly be arranged into the two categories of fireproof and non-fireproof material. The former symbolizes the gospel of Christ crucified, which can withstand testing by God on his eschatological 'day', whereas the second category, the form and substance of human wisdom, cannot endure (with its element of self-interest or gain). Here again Paul is using apocalyptic categories, since the notion of fire as a sign of God's testing of human deeds is firmly established in early Christian and Jewish apocalyptic traditions (cf. Dan. 7:9-10; Rom 2:5; I Peter 1:7). It is also probably significant that the first three, 'gold, silver and precious stones', are frequently used in the Jewish Scriptures to denote the building materials of the Jewish Temple (I Chron. 29:2; II Chron. 3:6). This suggests that Paul's illustration, like the field in the earlier section, is deliberately evocative of scriptural images, and it also prepares the way for the image of God's community as a temple in 3:16-17.

The Spirit-Dwelling Temple (3:16-17)

The church is not any building, but the temple in which God's Spirit dwells. It is not just any part of the temple, because Paul here uses the term *naos* (to denote the most sacred part, the sanctuary) rather than *hieron* (the temple in general). This adds the element of holiness to the image. The people of God is thus the sacred sanctuary of the Holy Spirit. And while Paul elsewhere in this letter speaks of the Spirit dwelling in each believer as an individual (6:19), here the emphasis - in accordance with his line of argument - is on the gathered believing community as

the Spirit's dwelling-place. Paul's transference of language from the physical Jerusalem temple to the people as the spiritual temple of God is daring (the temple was still standing) but not unprecedented. The Qumran sectarians also viewed themselves as the new temple of God, at least until correct worship was restored in Jerusalem (see 1QS 8:5-10), whereas apocalyptic traditions look ahead to the establishment of a new or renewed temple in the eschatological future (cf. Isa. 28:16-17; *I Enoch* 91:13; *Jubilees* 1:17). The church, for Paul, is that eschatological temple, whereas the indwelling of the Spirit is the sign of God's presence.

The reference to God's destruction of the one who seeks to destroy his dwelling-place is also interesting. It is reminiscent of pagan and Jewish evidence about temples being protected from plunderers by temple police and by the issuing of a divine curse against those who violate the sanctuary (Polybius 31.9.3; Josephus, *Ant.* 9.223-26).

The Foolishness of Boasting (3:18-23)

At this point in the argument, Paul reintroduces the themes of wisdom, foolishness and boasting. These themes form a connecting link (*inclusio*) to the opening sections of the letter (1:18-31). The focus now is on the foolishness of boasting about human leaders, because factionalism is inextricably linked to such boasting. As earlier in the letter, Paul calls for an inversion of the kind of social norms in which human wisdom is equated with status and influence. He urges the Corinthians to examine themselves. To become truly 'wise' they must yield their human understanding of 'wisdom'. The wisdom of the world is the complete opposite of the wisdom of God; it is nothing but foolishness.

To demonstrate the futility of human wisdom Paul appeals to scripture, this time to two new texts (Job 5:12-13; Ps. 94:11). In the case of the Job text the words 'He catches the wise in their craftiness' demonstrate God's ability to unveil the true character of human wisdom. Psalm 94:11 highlights the theme of God's opposition to worldly estimations of wisdom: 'The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile'.

Such futile wisdom is expressed in the boasting about human leaders. In a conscious reversal of the party slogans ('I belong to...'), Paul announces that such leaders (Paul, Apollos, and this time Cephas) in fact belong to the Corinthians,

because their role is to serve the church ('servants' earlier in the chapter). So what is Paul trying to accomplish here? He is seeking to promote a sense of common identity, a kind of common ownership of the various leaders. What is also striking is that this claim about all belonging to the Corinthians appears to be a reversal of popular Graeco-Roman philosophy. There is a well-known maxim quoted by Seneca that 'the wise man possesses all things'. And the orator Cicero describes the philosophy of the Stoics as follows: 'Then, how dignified, how lofty, how consistent is the character of the Wise Man as they depict it. Rightly will he be said to own all things, who alone knows how to use all things' (*De Finibus* 3.22.75). Paul's technique once again is both ironic and subversive.

'The all things' in this respect are taken up in Paul's extended list of what belongs to the believers: leaders, but also the world, life, death, present or future. All these things are at the service of the believing community, because - as the people of God - they are at the heart of his plan for the world. Above all, in a powerful expression of the unity for which Paul is appealing, the Corinthians are bound together by their mutual belonging to Christ (echoing the slogan of 1:12) who, in turn, belongs to God (3:23).

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