

INTRODUCING 1 CORINTHIANS

Café Church, Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford 12 January 2008

1. A CITY TO RECKON WITH

1. Corinth was a strategic city

According to one version of Prov 1.14 (LB): “*For want of skilful strategy an army is lost; victory is the fruit of long planning*”.

By & large military victories aren't due to luck – rather victories are won by generals who have developed the right strategies.

Paul in his desire to win the world for Jesus, likewise took strategy seriously.

He knew that there were vital centres from which the Gospel could filter out to other towns and villages.

Corinth, from a world mission perspective, was a strategic centre for a number of reasons:-

1. ***A sizeable city***: at that time it had a population of some 600,000 people – interestingly, of that 600,000 some 460,000 were slaves
2. ***A politically influential city*** – as the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, was there that Gallio, the Roman pro-consul resided (18.12).
3. ***A commercially important city*** – much of the traffic of the ancient world passed through Corinth. Situated on a 4 mile wide isthmus connecting the Greek mainland with the large peninsula of Peloponnesus, it had two ports, Leachaeum on the west giving access to the Adriatic & Cenchrea giving access to the Aegean. Ships would offload their goods at one port with a view to the goods then being taken across the isthmus to connect up with another vessel at the other port – indeed, if the ship was not too large, the ship itself was hauled over the isthmus. The reason for this was that the voyage around Cape Malea at the southern end of the Peloponnesus was long and dangerous. The Greeks had a saying: “*Let him who sails around Malea first make his will*”

I.e. Paul had good reason for going to Corinth. It was a strategic city, which offered the possibility of 1000s of people hearing the Good news of Jesus.

Q: The question comes to mind: to what extent do we as a church have a strategy?

OK, we may not choose to what town we might go to – but we can choose what group or groups of people we wish to major on.

What are the most strategic groups here in Chelmsford for us to reach?

2. Corinth was a wicked city

In one sense this was only to be expected – it was a sea-faring port & any sizeable port has a fairly lively night-life. As we often say, every sailor has a girl in every port. But Corinth was no ordinary port. Prostitution flourished on a scale unknown elsewhere. According to the historian Strabo there were 1000 ‘sacred’ prostitutes plying their trade in the temple of Aphrodite.

Venereal disease not surprisingly was rife: we see evidence of this today in the Asclepius room of the museum in Corinth where there are a large number of clay votives of human genitals offered to the god for the healing of that part of the body. The city of Corinth and promiscuity were more or less synonyms. The Greeks developed a special verb based on the name of Corinth (*korinthisein*) – to play the Corinthian – that is, to be promiscuous.

Corinth might have been strategically important for the Gospel, it was also a difficult place to share the Gospel. No wonder Paul wrote that when he came to Corinth “**I trembled all over with fear**” (1 Cor 2.3).

A lesser man might have had second thoughts about taking the Gospel about such a city. But not Paul: as he wrote in his letter to the Church at Rome, a letter incidentally written in Corinth: “**I have complete confidence in the gospel; it is God’s power (dunamis – dynamite) to save all who believe**” (Rom 1.16)

As far as Paul was concerned, no situation was too tough. Paul’s faith in God’s power surely acted as the necessary catalyse for the working of the HS in that situation.

Q: The question arises: do we really believe that no situation, no place, is too tough for God? What for you are some of the most difficult people to reach?

I confess that I continue to be troubled by our failure to tackle the club scene here in Chelmsford. Its beyond us – but is it beyond God? Surely not!

2. A CHURCH WITH PROBLEMS

Corinth was an incredibly tough place to preach the Gospel – but nonetheless people did respond to Paul’s preaching, and a church was born.

But it proved to be a church with all kinds of problems – and thank God it did. For had it not had problems, then we would never have had the letters which we call 1 & 2 Corinthians.

Paul actually wrote at least four letters to the church at Corinth.

Letter 1

His first letter was concerned with an issue of church discipline.

He refers to this letter in 1 Cor 5.9-13: “**In the letter that I wrote to you I told you not to associate with immoral people. Now I did not mean pagans who are immoral or greedy or are thieves or who worship idol. To avoid them you would have to get out of the world completely. What I meant was that you should not associate with a person who calls himself a believer but is immoral or greedy or worships idols or is a slandered or a drunkard or a thief. Don’t even sit down to eat with such a person.... As the scripture says, ‘Remove the evil person from your group’”**

It is possible that we may have a fragment of that original first letter in 2 Cor 6.14-7.1. For that passage is all about believers separating themselves from pagan influences: “**How can right and wrong be partners? How can light and darkness live**

together?” (6.14)

If you look carefully at that passage you will see that it doesn't fit – that 7.2 follows straight on from 6.13.

Letter 2: AD 55?

Paul's second letter, was written in part in response to a letter Paul received from the Corinthians. Thus on a number of occasions Paul refers to issues, which they had raised: e.g.

7.1: **“Now to deal with the matters you wrote about. A man does well not to marry”** Paul then goes on to answer a number of questions relating to marriage; again

7.25: **“Now concerning what you wrote about unmarried people”**

8.1: **“Now concerning what you wrote about food offered to idols”**

12.1: **“Now concerning what you wrote about the gifts from the Holy Spirit”**

16.1: **“Now concerning what you wrote about the money to be raised to help God's people in Judea”**

16.12: **“Now, about brother Apollos”**

However, the letter was also written in response to news about developments in the church as also in response to a letter Paul received from the Corinthians.

The news Paul received came first from the family of Chloe: **“Some people from Chloe's family have told me quite plainly... that there are quarrels among you”** (1 Cor 1.11). But he was also visited by Stephanas, Fortunatus & Achaicus (1 Cor 16.17) who presumably brought news from Corinth.

So, e.g. in 1 Cor 5.1: **“Now it is actually being said that there is sexual immorality among you so terrible that not even the heaven would be guilty of it. I am told that a man is sleeping with his step-mother”**

1 Cor 11.18: **“I have been told that there are opposing groups in your meetings”**

Paul's comments about Christians going to court against one another (1 Cor 6) as also his reference to some of the Corinthians saying that the dead will not be raised to life (1 Cor 15.12) also presuppose that he had received news from Corinth.

It would appear that Timothy was then dispatched with this letter (4.17)

Letter 3

Following a disastrous visit to Corinth, which proved exceedingly painful to Paul (2 Cor 2.1) he wrote a 'Severe Letter' in which he tore a strip off the church for their wrongdoing. Paul refers to this letter in 2 Cor 2.4: **“I wrote to you with a greatly troubled and distressed heart and with many tears; my purpose was not to make you sad, but to make you realize how much I love you all”**.

He also refers to this letter again in 2 Cor 7.

What exactly it contained, we don't know, but some scholars believe that the last four chapters of 2 Cor (chs 10-13) is part of the 'Severe Letter'. There he defends himself over against some false apostles. There he has some pretty strong things to say.

Letter 4

Finally Paul writes his fourth letter, what is sometimes called the 'letter of reconciliation', our present 2 Cor 1-9, in which he expresses his affection for the church.

What do we learn from all this? Surely this, that from the beginning there has never been a perfect church. Jesus once said: "**Where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them**" (Matt 18.20). However, it is also true to say, that *'Wherever two or three are gathered together in Jesus' name, there are bound to be problems from time to time'*.

This should not, however, cause us to shrug our shoulders when problems arise, and say 'So what?'. Paul's letters to the church at Corinth teach us that it is important to tackle problems head-on, rather than simply bury our heads in the sand.

Q: What problems in church life (either here or elsewhere) have given you cause for concern? How have you reacted to them?

3. A CHURCH TO BE RECKONED WITH

It was against this background that Paul wrote to the church at Corinth.

Incidentally, do notice that here, as in almost all his letters, Paul always associates himself with others. "**From Paul...and from our brother Sosthenes**" (1.1). Paul was a great believer in team ministry. That's a thought!

However, my interest this evening is not in what Paul had to say about team ministry, but rather at what he had to say about the church: "**To the church of God which is in Corinth, to all who are called to be God's holy people, who belong to him in union with Christ Jesus, together with all people everywhere who worship our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours**" (1.2)

3.1 *The church is local*

"To the church of God which is in Corinth"

Notice carefully: Paul does not write to this community of God's people as though it were simply part of a wider church.

He does not write to that section of God's church which meets in Corinth.

He writes to "**the church of God which is in Corinth**".

In microcosm, the church as a whole was present in Corinth.

The clear implication is that for Paul every local church is an expression of the universal church. It has been calculated that of the 114 instances of the term 'church' in the NT,

more than 100 refer specifically to a local church.

The church of God was to be found in Corinth, in Philippi, in Ephesus, and Jerusalem.

The church of God too is to be found here at Central Baptist.

We are not part of the church, we are the church.

The church is in the first place is always local.

This NT emphasis on the local church is ***a long-held feature of Baptist church life.***

In this regard we differ from most other denominations.

NB the cover-sleeve of the NEB/REB. There it states that it was "*planned and directed by representatives of the Church of England, the Church of Scotland, the Methodist Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the United Reformed Church.... and the Baptist Union*". Unlike other mainstream denominations, the Baptist denomination is not a church. It is a union of local churches.

Precisely because of this emphasis on the local church, there can be no Baptist hierarchy. There is for instance no Baptist Pope - there is no Baptist archbishop or equivalent - for there is no wider church over which a Baptist Pope or a Baptist archbishop might have authority.

In the words of the BU declaration of principle, "*each church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer his laws*".

Baptist churches are first of all independent local churches.

It also needs to be said that the same NT scriptures which emphasise the importance of the local church also emphasise the importance of the wider church.

I find it significant that Paul when he addresses his letter to "**the church of God in Corinth**", is also conscious of "**all people everywhere who worship our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours...**".

Later in his letter Paul goes on to speak of the "collection" he was taking up amongst the Gentile churches for the poor of the church in Jerusalem.

Independency can never be the full story - we are called to be interdependent.

If we are to be true to the Scriptures, then as a local church we may not go it alone. For this reason as a church we belong to the EBA and to the Baptist Union

For this reason we belong to Churches Together In Chelmsford.

There is no room for isolationism - at either the individual or the corporate level.

Q: What do you perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of the Baptist view of the church?

2. Every local church is God's church

"To the church of GOD in Corinth"

Let me emphasise the self-evident.

Paul does not write to "*my church*", but rather to "**God's church**".

In some ways it would have been understandable if Paul had referred to the church at Corinth as "my church" - for he had been the one responsible for its birth and early development - in a very real sense he was the "father" of this church - and yet in spite of all he had done for that church, he never once referred to it as "my church".

From this we may conclude that ***no church ever belongs to one person - nor even to one particular group of people*** - every church is God's church.

I admit that when I talk with other ministers about Central Baptist, I sometimes talk of it being "*my church*" - just as in my sermons I sometimes speak of it as "*our church*"..

But when I do so, I am being sloppy in my language...

and, dare I say it, if you do the same, you too are being sloppy in your language.

None of us have any particular claim on this church.

With our minds all of us would readily acknowledge that our church is in fact God's church. However, I sometimes wonder whether we acknowledge this truth as readily in our hearts. The fact is that ***the longer people belong to a church, the more self-possessive, indeed the more selfish, they can become.***

It doesn't matter who we are, what we have done, how long we have been here - none of us have any rights.

Indeed, ***if any were to be any people having rights over this church, then it would be those who do not yet belong to this church.*** NB William Temple: "*The church is the only institution that exists for the sake of its non-members*".

This means therefore that when in church meeting we come to consider issues of one kind or another, our preferences and our desires have no role to play - our concern must be to do what God requires - and what God requires is that we do our utmost to win people to Jesus Christ and his church, and in turn see them serve God in the fellowship of his church.

Q: When have you had to put your own preferences to one side for the sake of others?

3. Every local church is a believers' church

Paul writes: "**To the church of God which is in Corinth, to all who are called to be God's holy people**". This was a church which was made up of men and women who had been 'born again' of God's Spirit.

If the truth be told, they were a pretty rough lot. Paul in 1 Cor 6.10,11 writes: **Some of you were... fornicators, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, ... drunkards... robbers [Goodness, what a church!] BUT you have been purified from sin; you have been dedicated to God; you have been put right with God**"

Similarly in 1 Cor 1.30 Paul writes "**But God has brought you into Christ Jesus... By him we are put right with God; we become God's holy people and are set free**".

What was true of the church in Corinth, should be true of every church. A church by definition is made up of people in whose lives God has been at work.

In the words of Paul to the Colossians: "**He rescued us from the power of darkness and brought us safe into the kingdom of his dear Son, by whom we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven**" (Col 1.13,14)

Or to use another metaphor, a church is made up of not of the once-born, but of the twice-born, those who have been born again into the family of God.

[1 Cor 1.2]

It is this theology of conversion which is at the heart of our Baptist understanding of baptism.

For in baptism we express our response to the grace of God in repentance and faith. This is where Baptists differ from the great state churches of Europe, whether they be Calvinistic, Lutheran or Anglican.

We believe the church is made up of the converted, that the church is a fellowship of believers. Church is not something we are simply born into.

Church is something we have to opt into. And we opt into it by responding to what God has done for us in Jesus.

Q: What are the implications of all this for me?