

A Letter of Concern

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:1-18, *The Voice*

Paul, called out by God's will to be an emissary for Jesus the Anointed, along with brother Sosthenes, to God's church gathering in the city of Corinth. As people who are united with Jesus, the Anointed One, you have been set apart for service. You are all called into community to live as saints with all who invoke the name of our Lord Jesus, the Anointed.

I pray that God our Father and the Lord Jesus, the Anointed One, will shower you with grace and peace.

I am continuously thanking my God for you when I think about the grace God has offered you in Jesus the Anointed. In this grace, God is enriching every aspect of your lives by gifting you with the right words to say and everything you need to know. In this way, your life story confirms the life story of the Anointed One, so you are not ill-equipped or slighted on any necessary gifts as you patiently anticipate the day when our Lord Jesus, the Anointed One, is revealed. Until that final day, He will preserve you; and on that day, He will consider you faultless. Count on this: God is faithful and in His faithfulness called you out into an intimate relationship with His Son, our Lord Jesus the Anointed.

My brothers and sisters, I urge you by the name of our Lord Jesus, the Anointed, to come together in agreement. Do not allow anything or anyone to create division among you. Instead, be restored, completely fastened together with one mind and shared judgment. I have heard troubling reports from Chloe's people that you, my siblings, are consumed by fighting and petty disagreements. What I have heard is that each of you is taking sides, saying, "I am with Paul," or "I am with Apollos," or "I am with Cephas," or "I am with the Anointed One." Has the Anointed One been split up into many small pieces? Do you think Paul was crucified for you? Were you ceremonially washed through baptism into the name of Paul? Absolutely not!

Now I am thankful that I baptized only Crispus and Gaius, so none of you can falsely declare you were baptized in my name. Now wait, as I think about it, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; if there are others in your community whom I baptized, I cannot recall at this moment. The mission given to me by the Anointed One is not about baptism, but about preaching good news. The point is not to impress others by spinning an eloquent, intellectual argument; that type of rhetorical showboating would only nullify the cross of the Anointed.

For people who are stumbling toward ruin, the message of the cross is nothing but a tall tale for fools by a fool. But for those of us who are already experiencing the reality of being rescued and made right, it is nothing short of God's power.

I changed my mind several times as I decided what scripture should be read before I began preaching. My thought process went something like this.

What would be the best introduction to a series on 1 Corinthians? Perhaps the first seven verses of the book – actually a letter – in which Paul identifies himself and greets those to whom he is writing.

But wait, if I include verse ten, we'll gain insight into why Paul is writing the letter. He's received some disturbing reports concerning disagreements, questionable practices, and moral lapses within the church in Corinth. He wants to write to the Corinthian Christians about what he's heard.

On further thought, if I go that far I might as well extend the reading to verse 17 – no, verse 18 – to get a more complete picture of what the rest of the letter will be like. And let's read it from *The Voice* to get a better feel for how this letter might have sounded to the original recipients.

And so, in this way we begin a several month journey through Corinthians. Along the way we'll hear from a variety of speakers on some of the topics Paul addresses – some theological, some logistical, some moral, some relational.

To understand the context for this letter, we need go back to the book of Acts, maybe even to the accounts of Jesus' life in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I enjoy learning as much as I can about the locations, timelines, and people featured in the biblical accounts. Even if you don't share this passion, I hope you'll stay with me on this journey to Corinth and the letter referred to in our Bibles as 1 Corinthians.

The book of Acts begins with Jesus' final words to his most loyal followers on a mountain outside of Jerusalem. After his departure, the majority of Jesus Christ followers were concentrated in Jerusalem. Some were scattered throughout Judea and Galilee – maybe even Samaria – the places where Jesus traveled during his ministry. Their numbers grew after the day of Pentecost.

With the growth in numbers came an increase in persecution, some from the Roman occupiers, but mostly from zealous Jews – like Paul before his conversion – who wanted to stop this Christian movement in its tracks. This persecution increased the spread of Christians throughout the region and even beyond into Asia.

Peter, Philip, and, later, Paul traveled throughout the region preaching about Jesus and teaching those new to the faith. The majority of these early believers were Jews who continued to follow their Jewish customs and abide by Jewish laws while they also followed the way of Jesus.

The Jewish Christians in Antioch expanded their vision and began preaching to non-Jews, referred to as Gentiles or Greeks or Hellenists. Eventually, they commissioned Paul and Barnabas to travel to Cyprus and on into Asia, preaching the good news about Jesus.

At first Paul and Barnabas intended to talk primarily to other Jews. But they were surprised by the opposition they encountered from some of their Jewish brothers and sisters. They were also surprised by the great number of people, including Gentiles as well as Jews who readily accepted what they had to say and eagerly began to follow the ways of Jesus. They were astonished to discover that Gentiles could receive the Holy Spirit too; that God had opened the door of faith to everyone. Many of these “God-fearing” Gentiles adopted Jewish practices, but some did not.

After appointing leaders for the new churches, Paul and Barnabas returned home. They participated in the Jerusalem Council where the decision was made that Gentile believers did not need to follow all of the Jewish laws in order to be good Christians.

On a second journey, Paul traveled with Silas, Timothy, and sometimes Luke. He and Barnabas had parted ways after a major disagreement. Paul and his companions visited the newly founded churches and then continued on to spread the gospel in Macedonia and Greece.

Once again they encountered opposition from Jews as well as from Gentiles. Once again many Jews and many Greeks believed and were baptized into the Christian faith.

They stayed in Corinth for more than a year and a half. Paul formed close relationships with Lydia, Aquila, and Priscilla and with the churches in the places he visited. We know from the letters he wrote to the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus that he loved them and that they experienced challenges – both from outside opposition and inside disagreements.

The third time around, Paul was joined by various companions along the way including Timothy and Luke. He revisited many of the churches of Greece and Asia. During this trip he spent the majority of his time in Ephesus, almost two and a half years. While he was in Ephesus, he conducted an extended interaction with the Christians in Corinth that included letters and emissaries going both ways between Ephesus and Corinth. Two of Paul's letters to the church in Corinth are preserved in our Bibles.

As usual, during this third trip Paul encountered opposition and also acceptance of his message. From reading his letters, we know that along the way he collected money to provide relief for the Jerusalem church. After leaving Ephesus he traveled on to Corinth and then embarked on a farewell tour as he made his way back to Jerusalem. After finishing this trip, he wanted to head for Rome, the capital of the empire, and then on to Spain.

All of this helps us understand something of the location, timeline, and people found in Acts and many of the books that follow it in our Bible. Let's focus now on the city of Corinth. New Testament scholars describe Corinth this way.¹

The emperor Julius Caesar established Corinth as a Roman colony about a hundred years before Paul traveled there. Many of the original Roman colonists were former slaves. Corinth was a lively urban center located on an isthmus linking the region of Achaia to the mainland of Greece. This port city attracted businesspeople, merchants, sailors, military people, and many other travelers. It was known for its services to the traveling public, including activities that were immoral.

Corinth offered a veritable smorgasbord of religious options – temples for Greek gods and goddesses as well as other traditional and mystery religions. Some visitors educated in philosophy came looking for opportunity to debate and discuss with others.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he set up shop as a tentmaker in the marketplace and began to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with his customers. Amazingly, Paul's message about a crucified Jew named Jesus took root and an assembly of believers emerged.

Paul stayed in Corinth for about 18 months. When he left, the congregation was still brand new. Most of the members were Gentiles, but some were Jews. The community also had a mixed social background. Most would have been from a lower economic class. However, a few would have enjoyed a more prominent status.

The diverse social origins, expectations, and perspectives that the Corinthians carried over from their world into the congregation caused disagreements and factionalism. Some of the problematic issues were sexually improper behavior, disagreements about leadership, divisions between the rich and the poor, dietary habits, and spiritual elitism. While he was staying in

¹ Information on Corinth adapted from Jacob W. Elias, *Remember the Future* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006), 100-104; Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians, Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 26-36; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 295-298; Raymond H. Reimer, *Connect*, Summer 2009, 29.

Ephesus, Paul heard about the problems in the Corinthian congregation. He knew he needed to address the divisiveness within the fellowship. His letters were aimed at helping the congregation grow in his absence.

It might seem curious then, that Paul doesn't immediately address the problematic issues in the congregation. Instead, he starts with a discussion of theology and foolishness. He acknowledges that the gospel message about the cross is foolishness to many people. Here's what he had to say, beginning with verse that ended the reading before the sermon.

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, *The Voice*

For people who are stumbling toward ruin, the message of the cross is nothing but a tall tale for fools by a fool. But for those of us who are already experiencing the reality of being rescued and made right, it is nothing short of God's power. This is why the Scripture says:

*I will put an end to the wisdom of the so-called wise,
and I will invalidate the insight of your so-called experts*

So now, where is the philosopher? Where is the scholar? Where is the skilled debater, the best of your time? Step up, if you dare. Hasn't God made fools out of those who count on the wisdom of this rebellious, broken world? For in God's deep wisdom, He made it so that the world could not even begin to comprehend Him through its own style of wisdom; in fact, God took immense pleasure in rescuing people of faith through the foolishness of the message we preach. It seems the Jews are always asking for signs and the Greeks are always on the prowl for wisdom. But we tell a different story. We proclaim a crucified Jesus, God's Anointed. For Jews this is scandalous, for outsiders this is moronic, but for those of us living out God's call—regardless of our Jewish or Greek heritage—we know the Anointed embodies God's dynamic power and God's deep wisdom. You can count on this: God's foolishness will always be wiser than mere human wisdom, and God's weakness will always be stronger than mere human strength.

Should I stop there? No, I'd better go on to the end of the chapter.

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, *The Voice*

Look carefully at your call, brothers and sisters. By human standards, not many of you are deemed to be wise. Not many are considered powerful. Not many of you come from royalty, right? But celebrate this: God selected the world's foolish to bring shame upon those who think they are wise; likewise, He selected the world's weak to bring disgrace upon those who think they are strong. God selected the common and the castoff, whatever lacks status, so He could invalidate the claims of those who think those things are significant. So it makes no sense for any person to boast in God's presence. Instead, credit God with your new situation: you are united with Jesus the Anointed. He is God's wisdom for us and more. He is our righteousness and holiness and redemption. As the Scripture says: "If someone wants to boast, he should boast in the Lord."

I could go on, but I really will stop this time. A feature of Paul's letters is that he keeps building on what he's said before. To understand what he was trying to say to the church in Corinth, we need to read what he wrote in the previous verses and the subsequent chapters. We lose something when we pull out a verse or two here or there. But now that we've read the entire first chapter, let's go back and look at a few verses.

The story of the crucifixion of Jesus was a problem for many of the people in Corinth. Paul explains this in verses 22-24. Let's read it from the NRSV this time.

For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The Jews demand miraculous signs; they wanted demonstrations of power. The Jews had been expecting a Messiah for a long time. They expected that this powerful Messiah would overthrow the Romans who had been occupying their land and oppressing them. It was a stumbling block for the Jews – literally, it was a scandal for them – to think that their Messiah could have been crucified. In their minds, the fact that Jesus had been crucified would have been near proof that he was not the Son of God.²

Greeks ask for wisdom; they expected to find wisdom. The Greek Gentiles expected and put great faith in rationally persuasive arguments. The claim that Jesus was the Son of God would have sounded foolish to them. They understood divine beings to be unconnected with human affairs. It would have been hard for them to believe that God would come to earth in human form, live among the people, and be killed by other humans. Neither the Jews nor the Greeks expected to hear a story of a savior who died on a cross. But what God did overturned expectations.

Whether something is foolish or not depends on one's perspective. For the Jews and the Greeks, the cross was foolishness. For the Christians – whether they were Jewish or Gentile – Jesus the Christ demonstrated the power of God and the wisdom of God. Their faith rested on the saving, transforming power of God that they saw demonstrated in the life of Jesus and, also, in their own lives.

But as I mentioned a bit earlier, even though the faith of the Corinthian Christians rested on the life and work of Jesus, the diverse social origins, expectations, and perspectives that they carried over from their world into the congregation caused disagreements and factionalism. The human tendency to follow the leader who you can see and hear and whose point of view most closely aligns with your own was on display in this newly formed church. People aligned with Paul or Cephas or Apollos and sought out others who did the same. Paul began his letter by telling the church members to set those other loyalties aside and focus on following the way of Jesus.

Today, instead of choosing a story book that goes along with the sermon theme we began using the stories from the Shine Sunday school curriculum from MennoMedia.³ There are resources available for the students to use during the week if that works for them. The current plan is to continue this practice at least through Christmas. There will likely be some “tweaks” along the way.

When we made this decision, I didn't expect or plan for there to be any connections between the stories from Genesis and Exodus and the letter to the Corinthians. So I was surprised to discover that today's story about Abram and Sarai's travel to a new place and the beginning of Paul's letter do work together.

Consider these questions adapted from the Sunday school curriculum. How did your congregation begin? Who were the first members of your congregation? What did they sacrifice

² Reimer, 29.

³ <https://shinecurriculum.com/>

so the church could be established? Who in your congregation has been called into ministry? Where are they now? What changed when they left to serve God in a new place?

Our congregation isn't as new as the church in Corinth, but a good number of our founding members are still a regular part of Salina Mennonite Church and can recount the life of the congregation over the years. What have been the disagreements? When have factions formed? Have there been questionable practices or moral failings? What have been the circumstances when the congregation worked well together to meet our goals? How have we demonstrated our faithfulness to God's call? What happened when we lived in unity with each other and with God?

I imagine as we read 1 Corinthians together, we'll be encouraged and challenged, complemented and convicted by what Paul had to say to the community of faith in Corinth. We're separated from them by time, space, and culture, but as humans trying to follow the way of Christ, we have a lot in common with them as well.

The pictures of ancient Corinth I used during this sermon were ones I took on my trip there in 2014. I'll end with one more. The people I traveled with came from a variety of places in Canada and the US. We belonged to lots of different churches that were part of several different denominations. We came with diverse social origins, expectations, and perspectives. And yet our common goal of exploring the world of Paul and following the way of Christ unified us. (Of course, unity is much easier to maintain during a three-week trip than during five or ten or forty years as a congregation.)

One of my favorite days of the entire trip was when we visited ancient Corinth. I always felt closer to the world of Paul and the early Christians when we were at ancient sites that weren't in the middle of some modern city. And during our time in Corinth, we celebrated communion together. Through this act of sharing bread and juice we affirmed that despite our differences we could declare together that Jesus is the foundation of our faith. Through our worship together we acknowledged the fact that the church is not building; the church is a people. This fact is the basis of a song that was one of the theme songs during the early years of Salina Mennonite Church.⁴ We'll keep this song in mind as we journey through 1 Corinthians together.

I am the church! You are the church! We are the church together!
All who follow Jesus, all around the world! Yes, we're the church together.

The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple,
the church is not a resting place, the church is a people.

We're many kinds of people, with many kinds of faces,
all colors and all ages, too, from all times and places.

And when the people gather, there's singing and there's praying,
there's laughter and there's crying sometimes, all of it saying:

I am the church! You are the church! We are the church together!
All who follow Jesus, all around the world! Yes, we're the church together.

⁴ *I Am the Church*, words & music: Richard K. Avery & Donald S. Marsh; © 1972 Hope Publishing Company. All rights reserved. Reprinted under OneLicense.net A-724774.