

## Who's Your Daddy? Paul's Unifying Work in 1 Cor 1 —4

It is a treat to open ancient writings! Imagination has space to soar, backwards in time, past the technological revolution, past space travel and air travel, past the internal combustion engine, past the scientific revolution altogether; past the beginnings of modern literacy levels, and into a time when 20 miles were a long way to travel in a day; when a letter required days, weeks, or months to get from Ephesus (in western Turkey), where Paul wrote it, to Corinth (in southwestern Greece), where it was first read out; when maybe three people in a room full of thirty could read, and only one could read with flare.

There was tension in that ancient room. It held a mix of people who had gathered in the couple years since their meetings had begun. Some were salt of the earth, blue collar tentmakers, day laborers, and others of the lower classes. These probably sat together, probably on the floor. Others, who had joined the group a bit later, were from higher strata within Corinthian society – knew which were the best wines, gathered in their spare time for learned discussions, or at least fancied themselves a cut above the rest. In fact, at their usual gatherings, these came early and hoarded the food, so late arrivers sometimes had to go without. (ch. 11) Maybe this happened even in the meeting you and I have entered. The gathering of such a wildly -diverse social mix would have been hard to find anywhere else in Roman society. The early Christians did it all the time – but it was not at all easy.

The group gathered at least once each week, sometimes more often, to eat, sing, pray, and hear scripture together. They made promises about what they would and wouldn't do and pledged their allegiance to their Lord with great solemnity. They no doubt had their weekly routines and kept them together.

This night was special, though: Paul, the founder had written a letter, and tonight their whole mixed crowd of slaves and masters, day laborers and wealthy merchants would all hear it together. Some were prepared to hang on his every word. Whose side would Paul take? What news had he gotten about them? Would he praise them or chastise them? For others, Paul was ancient history – the founder of a club they had entered under other leadership. They had heard stories, but he wasn't their guy.

When food had been eaten and wine drunk, when songs had been sung and prophetic words spoken, a long silence yawned before one of the wealthy and educated among them rose, stepped to the room's front, hoisted a scroll, and read:

*Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,  
 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord <sup>and</sup> and ours:  
 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.  
 I give thanks to my <sup>and</sup> God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind —just as the testimony of <sup>and</sup> Christ has been strengthened among you —so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1.1-9)*

The words that followed those words of greeting and thanks will occupy us for our January and February Mondays of 2025. Some parts will seem familiar, others quite obscure. But all of them usher us into that ancient living room where a leader addressed his people from hundreds of miles away, hoping that he still held sway with them, because he wanted their salvation.

## **PART ONE: PAUL’S PEOPLE**

We know more about the relationship between Paul and his fledgling Christian community in the Greek city of Corinth than we know about any other first -century Christian group.

- Paul stayed with them eighteen months on his first visit, (Acts 18)
- probably wrote what we now call “1 Thessalonians” from Corinth, (1 Thessalonians 1)
- wrote at least three and probably several more letters to the Corinthians, (1 Corinthians 5)
- received visitors and letters from them...

You get the picture. This was an active, if not always easy, relationship, and we can follow a lot of it just from knowing Paul’s letters

### **Paul’s First Visit (51 -52 CE)**

*After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because the Emperor Claudius (Ruler 51—54 C.E.) had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, <sup>3</sup>and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together —by trade they were tentmakers (Acts 18.1-3).*

“Aquila...had recently come from Italy...because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome (Acts 18.2).”

The Roman historian Suetonius tells us the cause of Claudius’ edict: “Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [the Emperor Claudius] expelled them from [the city of] Rome.” ( *Divus Claudius*)

“But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal.” (Acts 18.12)

Gallio, the brother of the famous Stoic philosopher Seneca, was proconsul of Corinth in 51-52 C.E.

### **What Paul Usually Did in a City**

We can be reasonably sure that when Paul walked into Corinth for the first time, not a single person there knew about Jesus. He didn’t join a church. He didn’t even have a Christian contact there. Instead, he (and any side -kicks he brought along) started from scratch.

We can reconstruct a lot about what Paul normally did when he entered a city from Acts and his letters. He probably began “spreading the word” among people in his guild of tentmakers, spoke to others in the streets, and soon began to gather a small group in someone’s home.

Paul’s Religious Background – Monotheistic, Jewish, Pharisee (Philippians 3.2 - 11)

Paul’s Trade – Tent-making (Acts 18.3, 1 Cor 4.12)

### **Paul’s Audience**

- Ethnicity -- Gentiles (Galatians 1.16; Romans 1.5)
- Social Class – Diverse, but weighted toward the lower levels (1 Corinthians 1.18)

- Religious Background – Normal Greco-Roman Polytheism (1 Thessalonians 1.9-10; Galatians 4.8; 1 Corinthians 8.7)

#### Paul's Message

- There is one God (so Idols are not real - Acts 17; 1 Thessalonians 1.9-10; 1 Corinthians 8.4).
- God sent Jesus, his Son, to “rescue us” from this present evil age (1 Thessalonians 1.9-10)
- That rescue was accomplished through Jesus’ crucifixion, which Paul spoke about vividly. (Galatians 3.1)
- God raised that Son, Jesus, from the dead (1 Corinthians 15)
- “Turning” meant “to serve the living and true God.” (1 Thessalonians 1.9-10);
- God then sent God’s Spirit into the people who “turned to” God from idols. (Galatians 3.2)
- The Spirit helps in worship (1 Cor 12)
- The Spirit indwells toward a new behavior (Gal 5; 1 Cor 6)
- God’s Son would return, ultimately, to save people. (1 Thess 1.10)

#### Paul's Manner

- Nurturing Parent and Nurse (1 Thessalonians 2.1-16)
- Sometimes Stern in Correction (1 Corinthians 2, 4)
- Paying his own tabs (1 Corinthians 9.14-15)

#### Paul's Group Management

- Worship. When Paul has a small gathering they begin meeting for worship (1 Corinthians 12—14)
- Hosts. As the group grows, a patron begins hosting the church in her or his house (Lydia in Acts 16; Romans 16.5; 1 Corinthians 16.19)
- Leaders. With growth, Paul appoints local leaders (1 Thessalonians 5.12; Philippians 1.1)

#### **Paul and the Other Preachers in Corinth**

Have you ever been in an organization during a leadership crisis? A faction has developed around a VP or another leader, and suddenly it’s not entirely clear who’s in charge. Or the coach of a sport’s team’s authority has been challenged by the star player, who undermines the leader. Paul’s Corinth looks a bit like that when our letter begins.

## Wave One – Paul’s Converts in Corinth (51 -52 C.E.)

According to Acts, the first converts to Christianity in Corinth were fellow tentmakers. When Paul arrived in Corinth, he connected early on with “a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.” (Acts 18.1-3)

In Luke’s portrayal of Paul’s mission to Gentiles in Acts is a strong emphasis and patterned portrayal of Paul’s focus first on the Jews, and only afterward on the Greeks. So the bulk of our info from Acts 18 features Paul’s debates and conflict with the synagogue in the Corinth, rather than the spread of his gospel to the people who would become his 18-month church in that city. But Paul clearly understood himself as the apostle to the Gentiles, and we would love to know more about his work in that much -larger segment of Corinth’s population.

What we do know is how Paul portrays this first wave of Corinthian Christians in the letter. Here’s how he puts it in 1.26.

*Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.*

Thus, while the Acts 18 narrative names only two well -to-do and well -placed individuals – Titius Justus and Crispus – in its recounting, Paul’s original flock seems to have matched the general population of the Greco -Roman world, which had masses of uneducated day workers, slaves, and small merchants, and only a small few of the educated elite. In fact, the first members of Paul’s group in Corinth were probably fellow artisans, with whom he would have mixed extensively as he paid his own way by making tents or awnings.

This first wave of Paul’s Christian group in Corinth came from among tradesmen and women like Aquila and Priscilla – salt of the earth from the lower classes. Over the

eighteen months of Paul's stay, they would have established both a strong loyalty to their leader, Paul, and a growing sense of connection to one another.

## **PART TWO: APOLLOS AND HIS PEOPLE**

Very soon after Paul left Ephesus during his missionary journey, an Alexandrian Jew called Apollos, a "learned" or "eloquent" man, came from Ephesus to Corinth. While such a brief and sparse description may seem insufficient, these small clues open an entire world of social reality.

### **Educated Culture in Antiquity**

To the educated class in the Roman Empire of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, rhetoric held an exalted place. So many scholars (including me) picture a second, more educated and well-to-do wave of converts to the Christian group streaming in to hear Apollos. This additional layer of community produced some social tension between the classes, along with a bit of a leadership crisis. And so, I Corinthians 1.11, Paul says "there are divisions among you", some saying "I am of Paul!" and others, "I am of Apollos!"

What can we know about people in Corinth who might have claimed, "I am of Apollos!" To answer this question, it may help us to take a brief journey into the educational practices of the first-century Greco-Roman world – and particularly the intellectual culture of Alexandria, Apollos's home.

First-century Greco-Roman society featured a stratified social hierarchy, in which education level played a significant role. A mere 10 - 15% of the population could even read and write at a basic level, so the vast masses of the Roman Empire were reliant on visual and oral forms of communication. And even within the 10 - 15%, the elite upper crust, who had been educated thoroughly, distinguished themselves off and often held their social inferiors in a blithe contempt.

Within this stratification of Greco-Roman education levels, training in and excellence at rhetoric was highly prized. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle (4th Century B.C.E.) laid out the primary elements of rhetoric:

1. Ethos appealed to the speaker's character and virtue;
2. Pathos reached into the emotion of the audience; and

### 3. Logos appealed to the hearer's faculties of reason and logic.

Educated Romans (mostly boys, alas) had spent hours in their youth copying down and then mimicking the speeches of great orators. The great first-century educator, Quintilian, wrote a ten-volume work detailing how a student would pass through stages of education to reach the pinnacles of rhetoric and philosophy. These students' facility with oratory would have endured into their adulthood and marked them off clearly in a mixed crowd, like a pronounced accent or a dialect. And in that ancient oral culture, people like the great Roman statesman Cicero could move masses with his stylized orations. Orators were ancient rock stars.

### **Alexandria as a Context**

What may interest us readers of 1 Corinthians even more than this general context is the specific value the ancient Egyptian city of Alexandria placed on rhetoric. The famous Library of Alexandria afforded students access to the works of classical Greek orators, and, since Alexandria had become an intellectual center, also brought a heady collection of orators into regular conversation with one another. Alexandrian oratory became known for its precision and crisp style.

Back to Apollos and those Corinthians who preferred him.

We do not know exactly what Paul's rabbinic education might have entailed. Paul clearly knew some of the rhetorical conventions of his day, and his teachings often overlap with the popular philosophers of his time. But it is very unlikely that he learned the stylized rhetoric of the highly-educated in Greco-Roman culture, and a degree from the training center for an obscure and suspect religion (Judaism) in a provincial capital (Jerusalem) would likely not have wowed the educated classes of Corinth.

On the other hand, Apollos went to the ancient equivalent of an Ivy League School, and he knew how to turn a phrase. In the small segment of Corinthian culture that prized rhetoric, Alexander would have been recognizable and attractive. We can imagine that high-brow people who had not even noticed Paul's little conventicle of Christians before suddenly found their way to a meeting, and then another.

The result would have been a bit of a culture clash, with at least an influential influx of moneyed and well -placed Corinthians joining the congregation.

## **PART THREE PAUL’S UNIFYING SOLUTION**

### **Move One – Focus on the Divine**

Normally when power struggles like this happen, whether in churches or corporations, leaders are tempted to accrue their power by undermining their “colleague” at the top, producing confusion in the ranks. We might expect Paul to do just that – to cut Apol los in his letter, in order to secure his own place. But Paul elects not to do that. Instead, he challenges the value system of those who would exalt rhetorical prowess over the Gospel message. He speaks of preaching the cross of Christ, “not in lofty word s of wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.” (1 Corinthians 1.17 -25) Paul never undermines Apollos. In fact, whenever he mentions Apollos, he works to equalize the two leaders, insisting that they are two servants with diffe rent roles – that God is the one worthy of praise. “I planted,” writes Paul, “and Apollos watered, but God brought the growth.” (1 Corinthians 3.6)

This theological grounding for leadership ought to land powerfully in our church - shopping American Christian culture. At a time when people (we?) customarily Google or search our city for churches with attractive, happening speakers, we ought to listen to Paul’s emphasis on content and his insistence that God works through each of the Corinthians’ pastors.

In chapter three, Paul uses two familiar images as metaphors for the way God does things. The first is agricultural:

*I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each b e rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co -workers in God’s service; you are God’s field...* (1 Corinthians 3.6-9)

The second metaphor comes from the world of building construction.



*[You are] God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames. (1 Corinthians 3.10-15)*

Notice again in the building metaphor, that Paul centralizes Christ, rather than himself or Apollos.

## **Move Two – Remind the Corinthians of Paul's Unique Role**

Only in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter, as he prepares to form the Corinthians through his letter, does Paul even come close to pulling rank. There he points out that they may have many “guardians”, but only one father. He then states the obvious conclusion: “Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.” (1 Corinthians 4.15) If we were translating in the King James world, we might render the verb here translated “became your father” as “begat”. The language parallels Paul's mournful recollection of his beginnings with the church in Galatia:

*My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you! (Galatians 4.19-20)*

Paul clearly understood himself as the Corinthians' spiritual father, and he tailors chapters 1–4 at least partly to persuade the Corinthians to afford him this status. This last campaign for their loyalty and for their listening ear is crucial to Paul's hope that his letter will serve and influence more than simply his loyal base. If he woos them through his words, the next 12 chapters will do their work. If not, they will not, and a schism might form. Much is at stake for Paul as a leader. He needs their attention and deference.

## **Close**

Just as Paul vied for the attention of his ancient audience, so he continues to fight for readers in our time. Some Christians, put off by passages that apparently silence

women (1 Corinthians 14) and others that apparently class homosexuality as a vice (1 Corinthians 6). We'll talk more of these things as we reach the pertinent passages.

For now it's worth noting that, like the Corinthians who received Paul's letter so long ago, you and I need to make a decision whether to listen to him or not. As a Christian who has been reading Paul for more than four decades to my great gain in Christ, I urge you to give the apostle the benefit of your doubt. He has continually proved his worth to me. I hope he will do this for you as well.