

## 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9 - DESTINATION CORINTH

### Background

The *city* of Corinth was a successful, prosperous Roman colony, with lots of trade and new money. It was a new city, rebuilt by the Romans in 44 BCE after they had destroyed the original Greek city. Located on the isthmus of Corinth, it overlooked two ports and controlled the major east-west trade route between the Aegean and Ionian seas. A lot of the colonists were former slaves seeking upward social mobility, for Corinth offered many opportunities for economic and social advancement. There were a range of religious practices, and numerous sites of pagan worship, the city being adorned by magnificent temples, and statues of Gods and Goddesses in public places. Some of these practices had been linked to immorality - Corinth was a typical sea-port and probably the moral behaviour of its inhabitants reflected this! Corinth had Greek roots, and its people were interested in Greek philosophy, putting a high premium on wisdom and public speaking.

The *Church* in Corinth had probably only been in existence for about 5 years when Paul wrote this letter. Planted by Paul, who had stayed there for 18 months (Acts 18: 1-11), it was made up of mostly Gentile Christians, and met in the private homes of its more affluent members, maybe as several house-churches. Corinthian Christians were much influenced by the prevailing cultural and social factors and popular philosophies of their day and as a young church, were not very consciously Christian in either thought or behaviour.

**Read** Acts 18:1-19:1 first, to familiarise yourselves with the Corinthian church's background, followed by our main passage, 1 Cor 1: 1-9

### Introduction

- Think about the identity of HTC. If HTC were a type of transport, what would it be, and why? (Bus? Aston Martin? Battleship? Luxury cruise liner.....?)

### Themes and application

- Paul calls himself an apostle (v1). What is his authority for doing this? What exactly is an apostle? How then should we listen to his words?
- What does Paul say about the identity of the Corinthian church and what does this mean? (v2). In what sense is it true of us? What are the practical implications of being a church *'together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ'*?
- Paul gives thanks for the God-given characteristics of the Corinthian church (vs4-7). What are these? What might Paul thank God for at HTC?
- There was a sense of expectation in the Corinthian church as they eagerly awaited Jesus (v7). Is this something we share? If not, what hinders us?
- Paul ends this section (vs4-9) of thanksgiving to God with a promise of God's faithfulness. Are these promises for us as well? Can you share some examples of God's faithfulness in HTC or in your own life?

*Conclude by spending some time thanking God for his grace and faithfulness to us at HTC. Pray that he will give us the grace we need to be his church in Claygate*

## CORINTHIANS 1:10-17 - DIVIDED LOYALTIES

### Background

A fundamental theme of 1 Corinthians is sounded in 1:10 *'I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought'*. Paul had left the church in a relatively harmonious condition, but now has learned, to his dismay, that factions have arisen which are splitting the church. There was a tendency in the Greek world for pupils to follow their masters, and Paul describes four 'parties'. The Paul-party retained a loyalty to Paul. Apollos (see Acts 18:24-19:1) came from Alexandria, a great university city. He had great intellectual ability, and was a fine teacher and public speaker – maybe with his background he might have been unwittingly responsible for introducing something of an intellectual elite into the church. The Peter-party probably represented Jewish Christianity in some form. Paul's disapproval of the Christ-party is a bit of a puzzle. It may be that some of the Corinthians were claiming Christ as their leader in an exclusivistic way ('We are the ones who *really* belong to Christ, but we're not so sure about you'). When 'I belong to Christ' becomes the rallying cry of a faction within the church, Christ is effectively reduced in status to just one more leader

**Read** 1 Cor 1: 10-17

### Introduction

- Without going into unhelpful detail, talk about the type of splits in the church you have witnessed or even experienced (you can range anywhere, from divisions in the Anglican or world-wide church, down to factions in HTC) Why did they happen and what was the result?

### Themes and application

- Paul talks about the divisions in the Corinthian church (vs11-12). What was the real problem and how might it be present in today's church? Why do these divisions arise and how are they so damaging?
- Paul gives a scathing response to the divisions he sees in the church (vs13-17)
  - What is Paul's response to the various parties and their followings (cf 2 Cor 4:5)?
  - How might focussing on Jesus help to prevent and heal divisions? How can we practically achieve this?
- Paul has a passionate vision for a united church (v10). Is such a thing possible today or is it pie in the sky?
  - What is the basis of our unity? (cf 1 Cor 1:17b-18; Ephesians 4:3-5; also 2 Tim 1:13-14))
  - What are the benefits of such unity? (cf John 17:20-24)
  - What disciplines do we need to promote unity? (cf James3:7-12)

*It has been said that there is a reason why God gave us two ears and only one mouth. Conclude by revisiting one of the splits/factions that you talked about in the introductory question. Are you listening sufficiently to find the basis for unity? Pray for these situations that we might rediscover real unity in Christ*

## 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 -WEAKNESS AND POWER

The Corinthians were very well aware of their own strength and power, indeed, they rejoiced in it. The city was a powerful commercial centre, 5 times larger than Athens. The heart of the city was full of magnificent buildings, temples, shrines and statues that wealthy Corinthians had had erected to demonstrate their personal wealth and status.

Worldly wisdom stalked the streets and lecture-halls of Corinth. Catch phrases of the day included 'the wise man is king' and 'to the wise man all things belong'. The Greeks were intoxicated with fine words, and placed great value on rhetoric and logic. Much of the controversy at Corinth may have been stirred up by the tendency for new Christians to regard Paul and other Christian leaders as public speakers, competing for public attention and approval alongside other popular philosophers. They got caught up in rivalries because they gloried in the superficially impressive human wisdom of the age.

### Introduction

- What sort of images of weaknesses and power come to mind in today's culture? Which individuals/groups are weak and who are powerful and why?

### Themes and applications

- The foolishness of the cross (18-23). The message that God has chosen to save the world through the cross, through the shameful and powerless death of the crucified Messiah, must have been profoundly shocking to the Corinthian Christians
  - Why is the cross foolish for the Jews? Or for the Greeks?
  - What sort of Messiah would our culture prefer, or expect?
  - In what way is the cross a challenge to our 'wisdom of the world?' (19-20)
  - Have we become so familiar today with the cross as a theme of Christian preaching that we have lost sight of how it turns the world's values upside down?
  - Is there a temptation to omit the crucified Christ in sharing the Christian faith?
- The power of the cross (vs18, 24-25)
  - How is the cross a demonstration of God's power and wisdom? How is it different from the way that we generally understand power today (compare the crucified Jesus with a powerful political figure)
  - What power can the cross have in our lives? (18) How can we respond to it? (cf 2 Cor 13:4)
- *'the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God stronger than man's strength'* (25). How is God's view of weakness and power different to our society's? What implications might this have for
  - our witness at work and home?
  - our shared church life?

*Jesus calls us to take up his cross if we want to be his disciples. Finish this session by reading Mark 8:34-38. Thank God for his saving power in the cross and ask for his grace not to be ashamed of the foolishness of the cross, but to be 'counter-cultural' in following him.*

## 1 CORINTHIANS 1:26-2:5 - THE CHURCH AND ITS MESSAGE

### Background

The Christian church in Corinth was a very diverse community. It was based around house churches, with each congregation centring around a Roman-style household. Roman households were much larger and extended than the ones we are used to today. Rich households consisted of family members, slaves, freed persons, hired workers and tenants all headed up by the *paterfamilias*, or patriarch of the family. Roman society expected all the members of the household to share the religion of the head of the household, and so house churches contained a huge mix of people, from the influential household heads and their immediate families, down to hired workers and slaves. Paul calls them all his 'brothers' (v26)

The Corinthians loved fine rhetoric and argument. In Greek culture all political and legal processes depended on the power of oratory and powerful orators received the same sort of acclaim and public adulation that movie stars and sports heroes receive today. We know from 2 Corinthians 10:10 that Paul, in contrast, was regarded by his rival Corinthian preachers as unimpressive "*his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible*"

**Read** 1 Cor1:26–2:5

### Introduction

- We can come to a faith in Christ in many different ways. Some of us have been Christians for years, some for a relatively short time. Some of us may have been brought up in Christian homes and have gradually made the Christian faith their own as they have grown up, others will have had a conversion experience and can pin-point the time when they came to faith. Share something of your life before you came to a living faith in Christ.

### Themes and application

- The nature of the church (1: 26–31)
  - Why does Paul get the Corinthian church to remember their humble origins (v26-29)?
  - How closely does HTC fit the description of the Corinthian church in vvs 27-28?
  - God chooses to work through things that are apparently weak and foolish. How might this impact on our life as a church and as individual Christians?
  - In what ways might we be tempted to boast (v29)? How can we ensure that we only boast 'in the Lord' (31)?
- The Christian message (2:1-5)
  - Why did Paul reject impressive, eloquent preaching when he came to Corinth? What response did he get? (see Acts 18:1-11; 1 Cor 1:23; 2 Cor 10:10)
  - How might Paul's preaching and its content (v2) be received at HTC today?
  - What does this passage teach us about our priorities in listening to teaching in church?
  - how do these verses encourage us in the way we share our faith?

*Think about the vast range of activities that people are involved in at HTC –welcomers, coffee-makers, children's leaders, cooks, gardeners, office helpers, readers, pray-ers carers, PCC members, etc. etc. to name just a few. Thank God for all those people involved, and pray that everything that we do as a church may be not so that we might boast, but so that God may be glorified.*

## 1 CORINTHIANS 2:6-16 - REAL CLEVER

### Background

*Wisdom* was a key term in Corinthian culture, and to be considered wise was something to be very proud of. In the Corinthian setting, wisdom could refer both to possessing exalted or special knowledge, and also to expressing that knowledge by way of polished and powerful public speaking and rhetoric. Many of the new Christians at Corinth may therefore have thought of Paul and other Christian leaders as orators who competed for public attention alongside other popular philosophers, and as such they were unimpressed by Paul's 'wisdom'. The Corinthians also prized *maturity*, a word that described people who had reached an advanced stage of spiritual maturity and perfection. In this passage, Paul puts the Gospel in a completely different category compared with the other varieties of 'wisdom' on offer in the popular market-place of ideas, and tells them that he does actually preach God's wisdom *among the mature* (v6)

**Read** 1 Cor2:6-16

### Introduction

- Our society may not be as openly proud of wisdom as the Corinthians, but we still search for wisdom. Where do people look for wisdom today? What kind of people are considered wise?

### Themes and application

- God's wisdom and the world's wisdom (vv6-10a)
  - What is the judgement on the world's wisdom (v6)? How does this challenge the sources of wisdom that we identified in our opening question?
  - What does 'God's secret wisdom' (v7) mean? Are we in on the secret? (see also Romans 16:25-26)
  - do you think Jesus would have been crucified today (v8)?
  - How clever are we on our own? Why is it important to remember this? think of some specific situations where we need to recognise our human limitations.
- Life in the Spirit (vv10b-16)
  - make a list of how Paul sees the benefits of having the Spirit of God?
  - What is the proper balance between human wisdom and God's Spirit?
  - Does v15 mean that it doesn't matter what non-Christians think of us?
  - What does Paul mean by the 'mind of Christ'? How can we make this real in our lives (see Gal 5:22-23 and also below)

*To claim that we have 'the mind of Christ' might sound scandalously bold, but there is no reason for the Church to exist if it is not true, so we need to take the claim seriously. Look at Philippians 2:1-13, and reflect on how having 'the mind of Christ' might influence our thoughts, words and actions. (Notice that the verse addresses us in the plural).*

## 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-9 - GROWING IN GOD

### Background

Remember how in our previous session, Paul had talked about speaking a message of wisdom among the mature. The Corinthians probably thought of themselves as spiritually mature, but they were in for a shock, as Paul addresses them not as 'spiritual', but as 'worldly', 'mere infants'. We know from 1 Corinthians 1:11-12 that the Corinthian church was quarrelsome and divided. In this passage, Paul proceeds to speak out against the various factions of the Corinthian church who were following different leaders and shows them a model of how authentic Christian leadership and maturity should be.

**Read** 1 Cor3:1-9

### Introduction

- Think back to times in your Christian journey when you have experienced particular growth in your relationship with God. What were the circumstances? How did you experience God in them and respond to Him?

### Themes and application

- Toddler Christianity! (vv1-4)
  - What was the evidence for the Corinthians' immaturity? (vv2-3)
  - What is the difference between spiritual milk and solid food? (be practical in your answer and see also Hebrews 5:12-14). how does a church provide both types of food and yet encourage the latter? if your spiritual diet is solid food today, what helped you make the transition from milk?
  - Going beyond this passage what are the other signs of Christian immaturity? Why is maturity such an important aim for Christian living, and how might it be achieved? (see also Ephesians 4:11-16)
- God's growth (vv5-9)
  - Why does it make no sense to focus on individual leaders/teachers?
  - Why is it a temptation and how can it be avoided?
  - How are you aiming to grow as a mature disciple over the next 6 months? What would help HTC become more mature as a church?

*End the session by thinking back and remembering the people through whom God has enabled you to grow as a Christian. Share your stories if appropriate. Thank God for those people, and thank him that he gives the growth.*

*During the week, spend some time doing a 'spiritual stocktake', reflecting back on how you answered the question about growth over the next 6 months. Ask God to show you the first steps to take to make that growth a reality in your life.*

## 1 CORINTHIANS 3:10-22 - BUILDING AND LEARNING WITH GOD

### Background

The Corinthians were very proud of their wealth and status. And the key way to get on in Corinth was to establish your public reputation. Archaeologists have discovered in the ruins of ancient Corinth a remarkable number of inscriptions of people who wanted to record their donations to public buildings and works. You needed to establish a reputation for public benevolence, develop a name, put yourself about, impress. This was the context into which Paul speaks out against boasting (v21).

Read 1 Cor3:11-17

### Building with God. Themes and application

- *Foundations* (vv10-11). Why does Paul play down his own role in the Corinthians' journey of faith? What does it mean to have Jesus Christ as our foundation? What would the alternatives be? (see also Ephesians 2:20) How can we check that Jesus Christ is our foundation?
- *Materials* (vv12-15). Paul describes two types of materials, one that will last and the other that won't. Think of examples of this for Christians today, and why one will last and the other won't. How can we make sure we are building with the right materials?
- *Temple* (vv16-7). What are the implications of being described as God's temple? (see also Ephesians 2:21-22; 1 Corinthians 6:19) How is this both an encouragement and a challenge?

Read 1 Cor3:18-22

### Introduction

- Have some copies of *Hello* magazine or something similar to look at. How do today's celebrities wish to be known? What sort of image of themselves do they want to portray to us?

### Growing with God. Themes and application

- *Self deception* (v18) Why does Paul warn the Corinthians about self-deception? Is this a challenge we need to hear? How might we deceive ourselves? Why is this a temptation in a culture of success? Why is it dangerous (see also James 1:22-23)
- *Who we really are* (v18b-20) How might the Corinthians have responded to these verses. Why are these verses humbling? How can we remember who we really are before God?
- *What we really have* (vv21-22)
  - What does Paul mean by 'all things are yours' (vv21,22)? how is v23 a balance to this?
  - who do we belong to? how does this challenge personal freedom?

*Describe the building blocks to your faith thus far. Ask God to help you be realistic about yourself and help you build with materials that will enable your faith to grow in the long-term.*

## 1 CORINTHIANS 4:1-13 - WHO'S JUDGING? AND FOOLS FOR CHRIST

### Who's Judging? Background

The Corinthians were used to judging others performance, it was part of their culture of public debating. They were also a society who had many servants and slaves, some of whom had a great deal of delegated authority as stewards of their masters' houses. However, whatever their position, servants were accountable to their masters. In this section, Paul confronts the Corinthians on their presumptuous judging of him, pointing out that as God's servant, he (Paul) is accountable only to the Lord.

**Read** 1 Cor4:1-7

### Introduction

- How much does it matter what others think of us as Christians?

### Themes and application

- *Servants/stewards* (vv1-2). We are called to be faithful stewards – what does this involve?
- *Judging* (vv3-4). Why is Paul indifferent to other people's views about himself? Should that be our approach as well? (see 2 Cor 5:20 for contrast) What makes Paul's approach hard to adopt in real life
- *The Lord comes* (v5). Why will God's judgement be superior to human judgement? (see also 1 Sam 16:17) How is this both an encouragement and a warning

### Fools for Christ - Background

When a Roman general won a great victory, he paraded his victorious army through the streets with all the trophies he had won. But at the end there came a little group of captives who were condemned to death, taken into the arena to fight with the beasts and die. With biting sarcasm, Paul likens the Corinthians in their success culture and their pride to the conquering general, whilst the apostles were like the captives. Paul refused to accept financial support from the rich Corinthians, instead he supported himself by tent-making.

**Read** 1 Cor 4:8-13

### Introduction

- Do people respect your Christian faith in your home/neighbourhood/workplace? If not, how is this expressed?

### Fools for Christ. Themes and application

- *Sarcasm* (v8) What point was Paul trying to make with this sarcastic comment? (refer back to v7) When are we tempted to think of ourselves as better than we really are?
- *Spectacle and scum* (vv9-13)
  - What images of humiliation does Paul use about himself?
  - What level of hardship do we experience for being a Christian? Are we more like Paul or the Corinthian Christians? Should we be like Paul?
  - Is our reaction to suffering for our faith like Paul's?
  - Where in the world are Christians experiencing what Paul describes in v11? What can we do to support them?

*Review. Take some time to review the whole term's studies. If possible, read right through the four chapters again. Share with each other the most important things to have come out of the studies a) for you as an individual and b) for us as a church. Take some time to pray through them together.*