

Eastwood Baptist (AM, 23/9/'18) **"PERFECTLY UNITED"** (1 Corinthians 1-2)

**Introduction** This morning we begin to look at Paul's first letter to a very faulty church. When we read 1 Corinthians we see that the church in Corinth had many problems. But in Paul's response to these problems we also are able to learn a great deal about what God wants churches to be like. God, in his wisdom and power, used Paul's letter not only to help the people to whom it was written, but to help Christians in all times and places understand God's will for every church

**Paul's Appeal for Unity (1:10)** I'm beginning at verse 10 of the first chapter partly to make my task manageable, and my sermon not unreasonably long. But also because this verse marks the beginning of the body of the letter. Paul has begun his letter to the Corinthians with a Christian version of the standard letter opening of his day. But he launches into the letter proper in 1:10. **Read 1:10.** Paul begins with an appeal for unity, and it is a most earnest appeal. Paul addresses his appeal to them as "brothers" (better in modern English, "brothers and sisters"). This reminds them that Paul appeals to them as their brother in Christ, and that they are each other's brothers and sisters in Christ. And he appeals "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ". This both gives force and solemnity to his appeal and reminds them that they should be united because they have the same Lord. He then underlines the content of his appeal by expressing it both positively and negatively. The earnestness of Paul's appeal for unity is very clear. But we might ask, "Why is Paul so earnest about this?" And, "Why does he begin with this appeal, ahead of all the things for which he could have appealed?" I believe that these questions are answered in the next few verses.

**Reasons for Paul's Appeal (1:11-17)** The first answer is that Paul was concerned about unity because disunity was a problem in the Corinthian church. **Read 1:11-12.** Paul first makes it clear that he is not guessing, he has eyewitness evidence of their disunity. Then he spells out the nature of their disunity: they are forming rival parties, based on their claiming to follow particular Christian leaders. For them it was Paul himself, or Cephas (that is, Peter) or Apollos. In the centuries since, many Christians have found their identity in following particular Christian leaders, and been divided by this rather than united by following Christ. But this highlights a puzzle. What about those who said that they did follow Christ? Paul places them in his list without suggesting that they are any better than the others. I think that the problem with them is precisely that *they* did think they were better than the others. It is not only those who have wrong ideas who are divisive – sometimes those who are right can be proud of their rightness, causing resentment and division. And Paul has a second reason for his great concern about disunity. He diagnosed this problem as a serious problem, something which was contrary to what it meant to be a Christian church, a group of people gathered together because of their shared faith in Jesus Christ. **Read 1:13.** Paul's three questions clearly demand the answer "No". Christ is not divided, so the followers of Christ should not be divided! Christ is the one, the only one, who died on the cross for us, so we must be united by being followers of Christ, not divided by being followers of some Christian leader. And Christians are baptised in the name of Christ, so we all belong to Christ, not to some Christian leader. Paul goes on in the next few verses to say that he is

glad that he did nothing in Corinth to cause people to focus on him rather than on Jesus Christ. This might prompt a further question. If Paul's behaviour was not the cause of the problem of disunity, what was.

**The Cause of Division (1:18-31)** Paul diagnoses the problem as one of boasting, particularly boasting about wisdom. Consider these sample verses – *read vv.19-21, 28-31*. Wisdom was greatly prized in Greek and Roman thought in the first century, so some Christians in Corinth were boasting that they were wiser than other Christians because they followed the wisest leader. Their words might have seemed to honour a particular leader, but their intention (whether conscious or unconscious) was to honour themselves. "Look," they were saying, "see how wise I am, because I have the discernment to follow the wisest, the best leader." And that way of thinking is still alive today. Among some Christians, it is still about something like wisdom. Some Christians see themselves as superior to other Christians because they belong to a superior school of theological thought. Some see themselves as superior because they have learnt from a particular Christian teacher.. But it is not always wisdom. Some Christians admire success, so they identify with a leader with a large following, or are proud because they belong to a Christian group which is growing faster than other groups. Paul tells us that any such focus on a particular Christian leader or a particular Christian group is dangerous. Not only can it lead to division, but it can distract us from the right focus, a focus on Jesus Christ and on what he has done for us. Christianity is about him, and about his death and resurrection. So we shouldn't boast about our own wisdom or achievements, or about the achievements of people whom we admire – we should boast only about Jesus Christ! But is Paul against all wisdom? No, he is against the wisdom of the world when it threatens the gospel, but he is not against God's wisdom. In Chapter 2 Paul develops this distinction.

**God's Wisdom and God's Power (2:1-15)** What distinguishes God's wisdom from the wisdom of the world? Three things, I think, according to Paul. First, God's wisdom is embodied especially in the message about Jesus, and his death on the cross for us. The chapter begins with Paul's coming back to the message of Christ, and of him crucified, which he had already emphasised in the first chapter. In this chapter Paul links this message first with God's power, then with God's hidden wisdom. Paul calls God's wisdom "hidden" and even "secret" because it cannot be discovered by human wisdom, but has to be revealed by God. This leads to the other marks of God's wisdom. God's wisdom is to be found in the Scriptures. Paul doesn't state this here, but he implies it. He implies it here by twice appealing to Old Testament Scripture (in verses 9 and 16) to support what he says. For us, of course, Paul's own teaching is to be found in the New Testament, and teaching about Christ and him crucified is to be found in the New Testament as a whole. Finally, God's wisdom is made available by the Holy Spirit. Paul particularly emphasises the role of the Spirit in this chapter, for example in **verses 12-14**. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to receive the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

**Conclusion** So let us live according to God's wisdom rather than merely human wisdom. If we do, we will boast only in the Lord. And if we boast only in the Lord, we will not be divided.