

5.4.1. *The Parties in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1–4) (by Peter Lampe)*

Fissures were tearing apart the church at Corinth. Christians who were converted by the missionaries Paul, Apollos, or Cephas called themselves by the names of their spiritual fathers and thus formed three different parties that were “puffed up” toward each other. They announced with pride, “I belong to Paul,” “I to Apollos,” “I to Cephas.”

The Corinthians saw nothing wrong with this behavior. From their pagan surroundings they knew that anyone who was inducted into a mystery religion developed a close relationship with the priest who had initiated him.⁶⁶ Thus it is understandable that they felt a special relationship to “their” apostle. They will have been astonished when one of the honored apostles himself rose up against that kind of personality cult. Paul proclaimed that the church’s division into apostle-parties was keeping Christ from being realized in the Corinthian church. If the Corinthians do not change, Christ himself will be divided (1 Cor. 1:13).

Why was their behavior wrong? In honoring Paul, Cephas, and Apollos they had forgotten that the same person works through all three of these men. With his spirit Christ created everything that happened through these apostles. For this reason the Corinthians could boast only of Christ the Lord, not of these three men — men who did not work by their own power and on the basis of their own qualities. Indeed, the apostles had not come to the Corinthians with exalted human wisdom that would have distinguished them as human teachers worthy of honor. Instead, they — or at least Paul — preached “in weakness and in fear with much trembling,” “not in eloquently persuasive words of wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:3-4, 13). Paul came to them as “the world’s rubbish” (4:9-13). The spirit of Christ could work full of power only in the weak apostle in whom the cross of Christ was portrayed. The honor belongs to Christ alone, not to the apostles.

Paul has “planted, Apollos watered, but God has given the growth” (1 Cor. 3:5-6). This “but God . . .” is the key to solving the conflict among the parties. To the degree that people lose sight of God and his activity in the church and thus make absolute what humans do, the church is in danger of splintering into partisan groups following “great men.” Instead of boasting of allegedly distinguished human beings (3:21), the Corinthians should learn to boast in the Lord (1:31). They are encouraged to think more of what Christ does in the church. The Corinthians belong not “to Paul,” not “to Apollos,”

66. For the Isis and Osiris initiations, cf., e.g., Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* xi.21.3; 22.3; 25.7–26.1; 27.3-8; 30.1; 20.1.

ULRICH LUZ

not “to Cephas,” but to Christ (1:21; 3:23). If they do not take this to heart, they will divide the one body of Christ, the church, with their apostle-parties.