UNITED IN THE SAME MIND:
A BRIEF STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS 1: 10

Robert S. Righetti

All churches, sects, cults and denominations rely on certain means to bind their communities together. If we examine such communities objectively, we may note that some of them have become important movements because their devotees or com—municants have rallied to a particular call. For one of the key factors in the development of any mass movement is the issuing of a call to unity for the promotion of some specific end. Of course such unity may be developed and enhanced in a variety of ways. Members of the community may be taught to give primary allegiance to a charismatic leader. They may be encouraged to accept a narrow conformity to doctrinal uniformity. They may be motivated by a call to an action such as proselytizing. They may be asked to focus on some coming historical change or apocalyptic event. They may be taught to hate a common enemy or the outside world in general.[1] Or they may be brought together by that most important of unifying forces - love.

Often, when attempting to bring unity and harmony to their various communities or "flocks," religious leaders will demand almost *absolute conformity* from the men and women who make up those communities and will place them under severe restrictions. At the same time, those leaders will often claim that they speak for God in a very direct way, will usurp the role that he should play in the life of the believer, and - in the cases of those that claim to be Christian - strip the individual believer of his or her sense of direct responsibility to God through Christ. So while the community of "true" believers may outwardly acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord of the church, its members will not really allow him to rule in it.

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1 The scope and effects of some of these means of bringing unity to a group or community are described in an illuminating fashion in Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

Of course it is not just the leaders of such movements who bear great responsibility for this state of affairs. Unfortunately, there are some - many of whom proclaim themselves to be devout Christians - who find thinking independently overwhelmingly burdensome, and thus they allow the prominent members of their groups, their spiritual overseers, to assume responsibility for their thoughts and actions. Frequently the result of such subservience by ordinary believers is a life of abnormal self-denial and great spiritual disappointment for them.

Despite this sober evaluation, it is not my purpose to delve into an analysis of the techniques used to create religious control mechanisms. Nor do I wish to make another call for unity within the "Body of Christ." Rather, in preparing this article, I have tried to keep in mind the conviction of Krister Stendahl. He states "that theology is too serious to allow humans to think theologically without playfulness and irony. To try to be as serious as the subject would be arrogant, and could lead the hearer/ reader to believe that I considered everything to be precisely as I describe it .... For as Paul said, knowledge - even prophecy - is imperfect. If one forgets that, it 'puffs up' (1 Cor. 8:1)."[2] None the less, I write with some authority on the matter of organizational religious unity, since for many years I was instructed that such unity meant speaking a "pure language" of uniform doctrines or "truths."[3] Therefore it seems logical that I should re-examine carefully one of the so-called "proof texts" that is used by certain religious groups to keep their members in the fold and "in line." That text is 1 Corinthians 1:10, and it reads: *"I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ,*

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2 Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press,1976), p. viii

3 As a Jehovah's Witness for nearly thirty years, I was bombarded by arguments which stressed the need to conform to "healthful teaching." Jehovah's Witnesses have long used the text under discussion in this article as a primary proof text to support their contention that all of their members must be unified in both thought and speech. Hence, anyone who disagrees openly with the teachings of their Governing Body is cast out of their community by excommunication or "disfellowshipping." For further information on this subject, see Raymond Franz, *Crisis of Conscience* (Atlanta: Commentary Press, 1983) and M. James Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,1985).

that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and same judgment."

Now, of course, the seemingly obvious meaning of that passage to many modern Christians is that they all should be united in doctrine, believing the same things. But in looking at the way that certain religions have tried to impress their members with the supposed need to be "united in one mind," in recent years I have come to wonder if the type of narrow doctrinal uniformity that I have observed among them is really what the Apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote those words to the Corinthian Christians of the first century. Therefore it is here that I want to give an important warning: in dealing with biblical interpretation, one should - although few do - keep in mind the kind of cautionary advice given by Henry Cadbury in his book, *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus*.[4] This careful study reminds us of the danger of presuming that events have always remained the same and of allowing contemporary viewpoints to influence the way in which we interpret the Bible. For once we have taken what a Bible writer says outside of *his* context, what he has written ceases to be his words; it becomes ours. So with that thought in mind, let me proceed to discuss 1 Corinthians 1:10 in both its historical and social setting.

THE SETTING OF 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10

In describing Corinth in Paul's time, most historical studies and biblical commentaries portray it as a thoroughly wicked city, known for extreme sexual immorality, avarice and greed.[5] But while this may have been true, we should attempt to understand Corinth within its own context, not ours. It was an ancient city which controlled the

4 Henry J. Cadbury, *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1937). This truly excellent study should be consulted by anyone engaging in the exegesis of the Scriptures.

5 See F.F. Bruce, *Paul: The Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 248-63; O. Broneer, " Center of St. Paul's Missionary Work in Greece,"*Biblical Archaeologist*, 14, 1951, pp. 78-96; Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Philadlelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983)

land route from the Peloponnese (southern Greece) to central Greece, Macedonia and Thrace, and it enjoyed a pivotal position as a vital seaport for Mediterranean maritime trade. Because of its commercial significance, it was attractive to the mercenary and adventurer looking for riches, excitement and sensual pleasures. It was also a center of worship for various cults including that of the love-goddess, Aphrodite, whose temple was also a house of prostitution.[6]

In 146 B.C.E., Corinth had been destroyed by the Romans for its part in a revolt against Roman authority. Except for a few buildings, the city was virtually leveled. Its adult male population was put to the sword, and its women and children were sold into slavery. Yet after a hundred years of desolation, the city came to life again. In 44 B.C.E. Julius Caesar reestablished it as a major trading center by planting a colony on its site to rebuild it. Hence by the year 27 B.C.E., it was in the process of regaining its ancient prosperity, and it became the capital of Achaia (southern Greece). It was, of course, a Roman colony, but it contained a pot-pourri of ethnic groups within its population. Among its inhabitants were Romans, Greeks, Orientals (Middle Easterners) and a large community of Jews. It had become the old Corinth with even greater ethnic and cultural diversity. Thus many of the old cults were reestablished, including that of Aphrodite,[7] and a number of new ones were introduced by colonists from diverse lands.

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[6] It should not be assumed, though, that this signalled a special depravity on the part of the cult of Aphrodite. From our point of view, temple prostitution marks the extreme limit of sexual immorality. To understand temple prostitution, one must remember that according to ancient ideas, Aphrodite not only bestowed the enjoyment of "love," but she also commanded men and women to participate in it. So it was quite consistent that temple prostitution should have been part of her cult. If young women earned their dowries by such prostitution, marriage was promoted. Hence prostitution was an act of piety. If, also, they gave themselves for money and then gave their profits to the temple treasury, that too was seen as a pious act and a thank offering to the goddess who was the source of all female beauty, maturity and fruitfulness. Thus the goddess was honored in her sanctuary. See Hans Licht, *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece* (London: Routlage and Kegan Paul, 1932), 293.

[7] Robertson and Plummer draw attention to the possibility that "it is not certain that this worship of Aphrodite had been revived in all its former monstrosity in this new city." They state also that "It is therefore possible that we ought not to

It was to this rebuilt and flourishing city that the Apostle Paul came some time in the years 51 or 52 C. E. Prior to his arrival, he had had little success in European Greece. Despite an earlier angelic invitation to "come over into Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9), he had received little positive response to his preaching efforts as he had been driven from one city to another. He had wanted to establish the gospel message firmly within the Greek Gentile community but had been able to leave only small groups of converts behind in cities such as Thessalonica, Phillipi and Boroea; and his experience in Athens had proven to be the greatest disappointment of all. There he had delivered a beautiful, scholarly sermon before the Council of the Areopagites but was received with little more than mild amusement. Thus for such a large city, his success had been minimal. (Acts 17:32-34) So when he began his activities in Corinth, it must have been with misgivings and the fear that his message might be ignored. He therefore decided not to try to impress the Corinthians with his great learning; he proceeded to settle down to earn his way as a craftsman. (1 Cor. 2:1-4)

To what must have been Paul's utter amazement, Corinth turned out to be a very fertile field for the seed that he was sowing. And the joy caused by this fact was enhanced even more by another vision. His Lord encouraged him: "Do not be afraid: speak, and do not be silent. I am with you, and no one shall harm you by any attack: I have many people in this city." (Act 18:9) Paul must have realized then that the program of making disciples for Christ was not his own, but the Lord's. So after eighteen months at Corinth, he was able to leave behind a large, energetic congregation - one which would prove to be instrumental in helping him broaden his range of understanding, human sympathies and his pastoral abilities.[8]

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quote the thousand ierodouloi in the temple of Aphrodite on Acrocorinthus as evidence of the immorality of Corinth in St. Paul's day." Yet they also recognize that Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth tells us that that city really did deserve a bad reputation. Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians,* 2nd ed. I.C.C. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914), p. xiii

[8] Many have ignored this developmental aspect of Paul's character. It is easier for most Christians to see him as fully mature in his views and attitudes throughout his ministry. Yet this is a dangerous viewpoint if one really wants to understand

CORINTHIAN SOCIETY

Over the centuries there has been much discussion about the people who came to form the first body of Christians in Corinth. But during this century particularly, major advances have been made in understanding who they were and what the sociological nature of their community was.[9] Some, like Adolf Deismann, have felt that they and members of other early Christian communities belonged to the "lower class."[10] Others have taken the view, as did E. A. Judge, that the early churches were dominated by the "socially pretentious section of the population."[11] But as Gerd Theissen explains, the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. In his excellent study, Theissen shows that the Corinthian congregation was stratified. He states: "The majority of the members, who came from the lower classes, stand in contrast to a few influential members who come from the upper classes. This internal stratification is not accidental but the result of structural causes."[12] There is another factor which compounded internal social stratification, as is noted by Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer. They remark: "A newly created city, with a very mixed population of Italians, Greeks, Orientals, and adventurers from all parts, and without any aristocracy or old families, was likely to be democratic and impatient of control; and

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why he wrote as he did. Consulting some of the materials cited in this article may certainly help provide a better background to see just how he did develop.

9 The works of Theissen, Meeks and Stendahl have already been referred to in connection with Corinthian sociology. Other works worth consulting are William Baird, *The Corinthian Church - A Biblical Approach to Urban Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964); Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (Richmond: John Knox Press,1959); L.L. Welborn, "On the Discord in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 1 - 4 and Ancient Politics," *Journal of Biblical Literature,* vol. 106, no. 1 (1987) pp. 85-111.

10 Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient Near East* (London: Harper and Row Publishers, 1927), p. 144

11 E.A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of Early Christianity in the First Century* (London: Macmillan Company, 1960). It should be pointed out that Judge does not limit the church to the upper class alone but includes the lower class as part of the upper class retinue.

12 Theissen, p.69

conversion to Christianity would not at once, if at all, put an end to this independent spirit. Certainly there was plenty of it when St. Paul wrote. We find evidence of it in the claim of each convert to choose his own leader (i. 10 - iv. 21), in the attempt of women to be as free as men in the congregation (xi. 5-15, xiv. 34,35), and the desire of those who had spiritual gifts to exhibit them in public without regard to other Christians. (xii., xiv)"[13] From this statement, it is obvious the Corinthian ground was as fertile for the production of problems as it was for converts. As William Baird observes: "No sooner had Paul left town than trouble broke out."[14]

The news of this trouble caught up with Paul in Ephesus by means of some members of the house of Chloe who were in that city either for business or while on their way by pilgrim ship to Jerusalem for passover. These individuals no doubt brought a report that the Corinthian church was in serious danger of breaking up into parties, and they may also have informed him of a sexual scandal which even shocked the sexually-lax Corinthians. (1 Cor. 1:11; 5:1-5; 6:1-7) On top of that, Paul also received a visit from Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus who, it appears, were the ones used to deliver a letter from the church at Corinth which raised specific questions about a number of problems which can be identified from the contents of Paul's reply to them in 1 Corinthians. As Baird notes: "It goes without saying that these couriers filled Paul's ears with news and gossip from the church back home."[15]

THE PROBLEM OF SCHISM AT CORINTH

We should not suppose that in 1 Corinthians the Apostle Paul was writing to a few faithful individuals who had remained together in a "church of true believers," as though the faction-minded had split off to form their own groups. Rather, Paul directed his letter to the whole church with the understanding that all would be present

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13 Robertson and Plummer, p. 69
14 Baird, p. 25
15 *Ibid.*, p. 26

together to hear it read. (1 Cor. 1:2) Yet the fact that the apostle devoted what has become the first four chapters of his first letter to the Corinthian Christians to the problem of schism indicates that he saw it as a serious threat to their remaining together. Thus it was that he penned the words of 1 Corinthians 1:10 quoted above. But what really did he mean by those words? Let us examine closely some of the phrases he uses in that verse.

Perhaps to the surprise of many, the expression "that you all agree" is most commonly associated with Greek political life, and the original Greek (*to auto legete*) has the meaning of "to be at peace" or "make up differences." J.B. Lightfoot states that "we have here a strictly classical expression. It is used of political com— munities which are free from factions, or different states which entertain friendly relations with each other."[16] So Paul's demand that "there be no dissensions" implies that they already existed. The Greek word for dissension (*schismata*) means "clefts" or "splits," and it signifies the direct opposite of the previous expression "that you all agree." Lightfoot also points out that the term dissensions "is here used as almost synonymous with *erides* [strifes]," [17] a term which the Apostle Paul also uses to describe what was going on within the Corinthian church according to the report brought to him by members of Chloe's household. (1 Cor. 1:11) Thus Welborn notes that *"eris* [the nominative singular of *erides*] is hot dispute, the emotional flame that ignites whenever rivalry becomes intolerable. It invariably appears in accounts of ancient political life the moment the pressure of circumstances, that is, the approach of an enemy army or the election of mutually hostile consuls, draws the citizens into confused knots."[18]

In studying these terms, that is *schismata* and *erides,* it appears that Paul could have been directing his letter to the participants in a political dispute. Again Welborn elaborates on this view, stating that "however strong the aversion may be to the presence of political

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[16] J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul from Unpublished Commentaries,* 2nd ed., (London: Macmillan and Co., 1904), p. 151

[17] *Ibid. ,* pp. 151-2

[18] Welborn, p. 87

elements in the Corinthian epistles, it is impossible to resist the impression that Paul describes the situation in terms like those used to characterize conflicts within city-states by Greco-Roman historians. Paul first speaks of *schismata* (1:10). A *schisma* is a rift, a tear, as in a garment: it is used metaphorically of a cleft in political consciousness (e.g., Herodotus 7.219: PLond. 2710.13)."[19]

With these points in mind, then, the expression "that you be united" becomes pregnant with meaning. The word "united" (*katérismonoi*) is explained more fully by Lightfoot who states: "The prominent idea in this word is 'fitting together': .... It signifies 'to reconcile factions' ...."[20] Thus when we come to the expressions "same mind" and "same judgment," the apostle is urging his Corinthian brethren "to give up, not erroneous beliefs, but party -spirit."[21] In using the Greek word *noi* for mind, Paul is using a term which implied the "inner orientation or moral attitude"[22] that those Christians needed - a frame of mind or disposition that tended towards unity, not absolute conformity, and that carried the idea of of individuals embracing one another in peace and love despite differences. "Judgment" or "opinion" (*gnomé* in Greek) would then be the fulfillment or outcome of that frame of mind and would refer to the "will"[23] or direction which the Corinthians might take. Consequently, by being "united in the same mind and in the same judgment," they could work through their differences and live together in harmony. However, it should be emphasized here that this did not mean that they had to follow a system of absolute doctrinal uniformity.

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19 *Ibid.,* p. 86

20 Lightfoot, p. 47

21 Robertson and Plummer, p. 10

22 Geoffry W. Bromiley, ed. and trans., *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* abridged (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), p. 637

23 *Ibid.* , p. 123

CONCLUSION

The background of 1 Corinthians 1:10, as it has now been pieced together, gives a different perception of what the problem among the Corinthian Christians was than is often supposed. Frequently, this text is used as a call for unity of theology or doctrine. Hence some even hold that there can be no true church unless there is a sameness of teaching and belief.24 But to apply this passage in such a way is to tear it from its historical context. L.L. Welborn drives the point home by stating: "It is no longer necessary to argue against the position that the conflict which evoked 1 Corinthians 1—4 was essentially theological in character. The attempt to identify the parties with the views and practices condemned elsewhere in the epistle, as if the parties represented different positions in a dogmatic cont—roversy, has collapsed under its own weight .... No one doubts that doctrinal differences existed, or that the claim to possess divine wisdom and knowledge played an important role in the controversy .... [However,] it is a power struggle, not a theological controversy, which motivates the writing of 1 Corinthians 1 - 4 ...."25

In a letter to another church, the Apostle Paul acknowledges that there might well be disputes over beliefs or ideas among Christians. At Romans 14:1, he states: "As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions." Consequently, it was about such disputes that he was concerned rather than about the specific content of them. So he could have said to the Romans exactly what he had to the Corinthians at 1 Corinthians 1:10. For in the former case, he was greatly concerned about those weak in faith, realizing that their consciences could be "wounded" and "grieved"26 by partisan disputes. (1Cor.8:12; Rom. 14:15) Thus it was that he

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24 See, for example, the Jehovah's Witness Bible dictionary, *Aid to Bible Understanding* (Brooklyn, N.Y. : Watchtower Bible & Tract Society, 1971), pp. 1030, 1160, 1289, and 1464.

25 Welborn, pp. 88, 89

26 The Greek word from Romans 14:15 which I have translated here as "grieved" is λυπεῖται. This same word is used to describe the disciples' reaction at the thought of their Lord being betrayed (Matt. 26:22), and of Jesus' personal intense experience at Gethsemane. (Matt. 26:37)

did not want "disputes over opinions" at Rome. Yet in counseling the Romans not to let them happen, he did not suggest that they impose a lockstep doctrinal unity on everyone. Rather, he indicated that they should develop a broad tolerance which would "let everyone be convinced in his own mind." (Romans 14:5)

On this matter William Baird makes an interesting observation. He states: "Whenever a segment of the church supposes that it has the true plan and program for the body of Christ, the wisdom of the world has been presupposed. The content of that plan may be indefensible on theological and biblical grounds, but even where its advocates can cite chapter and verse, human interpretation is involved. Interpretation of the divine wisdom is necessary, but the factor which turns this wisdom into folly is the notion that one particular understanding is true - that man's wisdom is God's."[27] The temptation of men to call upon the authority of other men, especially with the intent of lording it over yet others, much as did members of the church at Corinth, can have damaging effects.

When Paul speaks about learning to live together in peace, he charges "that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another." (1Cor. 4:6) Welborn explains what this phrase means: "It is all too familiar to the student of political history as the caricature of the political windbag, the orator inflated at his success ... the young aristocrat, the aspiring tyrant, filled with a sense of his own power ... the supercilious officeholder .... With savage irony Paul imprints the familiar image of self-conceit which gives rise to partisanship upon the surface of his text, as a flash transfixes an image on film."[28]

It is true that the insistent call to unity through the enforcement of singleminded thought and deed can bring a group of people together. But the kind of unity that it brings will not last. Therefore, it was not that type of unity that Paul encouraged among the Corinthians. Rather, he encouraged them to find a sense of oneness in another way. That was with and through the lasting power of *love*. Only with that one quality - which they would have to impose

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27 Baird, p. 57
28 Welborn, p. 88

on themselves in relation to others and which they would have to recognize in others - would they be able to survive the natural problem of "behaving just like ordinary men." (1 Cor. 3:3) What was true for the Corinthians is also true for us.

"Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way ; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends ...." (1 Cor. 13:4-8)