

# “How Can Our Christianity Survive In Such Cultural Diversity?”

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:1-9

9/10/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

## Introduction

The culture in which you and I find ourselves has several things in common with culture Paul experienced in the first half of the first century. When we see how similar it was to today, it will make Paul’s letter to the Corinthian house church seem even more appropriate to how you and I live our lives. Here’s why.

Before Jesus’ time, by about 300 years, Alexander the Great was a brilliant military strategist who also had the ability to lead and motivate thousands of troops.<sup>1</sup> He had been tutored by the renown philosopher and scientist Aristotle. By the time he was 20, he was the emperor.<sup>2</sup> By the time Alex was thirty, he was presiding over the largest empire in the history of the world.

It was the first time in known history that the world had seen a person and his associated leaders control that many countries and millions of people. The days of the local tribe were being shoved aside by a newer and more sophisticated “global village.”<sup>3</sup> Here is why it sounds so much like our time.

Because that Mediterranean world had become an international culture and because of their growth toward having a common Greek language, communication, education, the arts and religions flourished. The combining of several cultures caused the Greek and Oriental art, architecture, philosophy, literature and religions to blossom. In general, there was more openness to the rest of the world. It means that in this new world,<sup>4</sup> people were thinking and feeling that they were now part of the *world* – not just of their family clan or tribe or ethnic group with their own unique traditions. More and more, people now saw themselves as citizens of the world.

They heard philosophies taught and saw religions about which they had never before encountered. Much like our lives today, their world became a little smaller when more diverse peoples were gathered under a centralized government. “Cosmos” meant “world” then and it is where we get our word for our sense of being in the world “cosmopolitan.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> He ruled from 336 to 323 BCE (BCE means “before the common era” or for those in the Christian tradition, “Before Christ.”)

<sup>2</sup> (With what were we involved when we were 20?)

<sup>3</sup> to which Marshal McLuhan referred in our time

<sup>4</sup> what we call new “Hellenistic world,”

<sup>5</sup> Obviously, though, this sense of being a part of a larger and

With this new sense of their being a part of a more diverse world came several things that helped Christianity become accepted around the world – things similar to our culture today. **The love of wisdom and philosophy**, grew in popularity. People valued others who tried to understand more about human life and its place in the universe.

**Plato** and **Socrates**, before Jesus, devised views of the world that directly and indirectly influenced thought about ethics, government, human psychology and spiritual matters. They talked about the real world and the ideal – the physical life and that which exists beyond the seeable-touchable human sphere.<sup>6</sup> Note how similar the popular religions and philosophies then are to what we experience.

**Stoicism**<sup>7</sup> said we should be orderly, morally attentive and being reasonable is a divine characteristic. (Sounds a little like *Presbyterians*.)<sup>8</sup> The Stoics taught bodily and mental discipline, indifference to physical pain and avoidance of emotion – much like what we have seen portrayed in old films like “The Right Stuff” and the traditional male role model.

Outside of the Jewish sub-culture and in Paul’s travels, some were followers of **Epicurean** philosophy. This way of looking at life didn’t believe in a soul and felt that everything is just physical. Since all that exists is just the physical, our task, they said, is to avoid pain, use reason and find enjoyment in life. (*Sounds a lot like many people in America today, doesn’t it?*)<sup>9</sup>

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more diverse world of people only grew among people who lived in population centers and were fortunate enough to have access to education and a stable economic situation. So the customs and ethnic traditions of new neighbors and those they met in their travels went from being *tolerated* to being *accepted* and, in part, *imitated*.

<sup>6</sup> This two-part (dualistic) interpretation of life was picked up by the **Gnostic Christians** who, like Plato, talked about a special or secret wisdom about the unseen world and the supposed good and bad side of God.

<sup>7</sup> founded by Zeno about 300 BCE

<sup>8</sup> They talked of the *Logos* (the Greek word for *word*) . . . and so did John when he talked of Jesus being the divine *Logos*.

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, a fellow named **Democritus** (460 BCE) had a theory about how everything in this physical world is made of atoms. He said that all these tiny particles move and collide and temporarily form objects (like animals, humans, trees and buildings) but they come apart eventually to form other objects elsewhere. Wise or foolish, he said, all people are merely chance

In Roman society in Corinth, you might subscribe to the school of the **Cynics**. The Cynics<sup>10</sup> emphasized self-discipline and were opposed to the social customs and values that praised money, wealth or political power. They were against the *status quo* and materialism.

In the decade of the 60's in the last century, there were the so-called "flower children" and some movements toward living communally and adopting a simple life-style.<sup>11</sup> The so-called "hippies" were similar to the Cynicism philosophy in Paul's time. Some of you may remember the singers and poets Bob Dylan, Woody and Arlo Guthrie and their anti-materialistic life philosophies.

So in Paul's world, there were a lot of different outlooks on life<sup>12</sup> that were taught and debated in public forums. They didn't have Oprah and other talk shows but in Athens, their public philosophy debates were popular. According to the book of Acts, Paul was invited to come and debate about this new Christianity in the university city of Athens. The Stoic and Epicurean philosophers were interested and open enough to listen to him talk about this novel of idea of Jesus coming back from the dead. They were interested because of their open-mindedness and (again) cosmopolitan world view.

Paul's educational training was diverse and turned out to be an asset as he dealt with Gentiles in the broadminded Greek and Roman society.<sup>13</sup> He talked about Christianity being for anyone: Jews and Greeks, women and men, slaves and free persons.<sup>14</sup> When he encountered the Corinthian (and the larger Mediterranean culture debate forums of the Cynics, Stoics and Epicureans,) he knew how to talk with them.

Paul was familiar with the Greek ideas as he occasionally alluded to their poets and philosophers. From his reading and living among them, he knew of their trends, their likes and their prejudices. He used their

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collections of atoms – destined to dissolve without a trace. We'd expect this despairing sense of temporaryness to come from a philosophy that didn't believe in a soul or the human spirit. I'm reminded of the old song by Kansas (that is frequently played on easy-rock stations), "All We Are Is Dust in the Wind." (*actually named "Dust in the Wind"*)

<sup>10</sup> founded by Diogenes back in 404-323 BCE

<sup>11</sup> a parallel in Lennon's socialism

<sup>12</sup> Religions and philosophies

<sup>13</sup> It is clear that Paul's thinking reached well beyond the confines of the predominately male-oriented Palestinian Jewish sub-culture.

<sup>14</sup> 1 Cor. 15:33

Greek rhetorical style in the way he developed his letters.<sup>15</sup>

Paul knew that the city of Corinth was fixated on social status. Written on their buildings and in the way they debated, they would usually have a display of boasting and ornamentation about what they had, what they thought and how they lived. Speakers would play to the crowd's emotions. It became something of a popular movement then to praise things and people in order to get their attention and present, what they thought, with a flowery, emotionally-compelling and persuasive talk. Politicians, you notice, do it today. So listen to Paul's use of this rhetoric in the beginning of his letter.

### **1 Corinthians 1:1-9 is read.**

Religion in Corinth (and throughout the empire) was as diverse as it is today. What people felt they weren't getting in one place, they sought it out in another.

The standard **twelve deities** the Romans worshiped sounded pretty much like super-cartoon heroes with super-human abilities but ultimately typical human egos. Zeus, Jupiter, Neptune, Pluto, Mercury, Aphrodite and the others, were the patrons of wisdom, sex, or power but they were perceived as self-occupied, apart from human trials. People needed more personal gods.

They turned to **Asclepius**, the god of healing. They worshiped **Dionysus**, a god who was born of a mortal mother, endured rejection, suffering and death before coming back from the dead after journeying to Hades. Long before Jesus, followers of this god (and the companion god **Bacchus**,) linked wine and bread as part of their religious rituals. You can bet these people listened to Paul's new religion of communion with Christ, the healer and conqueror of death.

The so-called **Mystery Religions** went the furthest in trying to find a personal god.<sup>16</sup> They taught that there is a "god within" humans that can be awakened to bring the person to their divine potential. Today, you might have seen videos of some of the more popular American **Buddhist** teachers like Depak Chopra.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> He used their very way of education through rhetoric and debating throughout his letters.

<sup>16</sup> These religious cults were called "mystery" religions because they took oaths never to reveal their secrets. Not unlike some of the secret societies still around in our culture, these cults were actually private clubs of religion to meet their needs.

<sup>17</sup> If you've read the works of Sarah Ban Breathnach, Jon Kabat Zinn, Thich Nhat Hanh or the earlier writer Kahlil Gibran – you hear that god-within-us teaching element that strives to rid Western Christianity of its Puritanical dread of our physical natures and judging legalism.

But one of the main competitors of Christianity during the first three centuries was **Mithraism** – another mystery religion that actually became Rome’s official state religion. Mithraism, taken from ancient Persian mythology, developed a new cult based on interest in astrology. The so-called three wise men from the east, at Christ’s birth, were thought to be members of this religion of astrology.<sup>18</sup>

Mithraism had one fatal flaw, in comparison to Christianity – it was only for men. As the place of women in that society was on the rise, people who wanted more empowerment for women had to pursue the **Isis** cult. It promised a goddess who offered more personal help in resolving life’s problems as well as the assurance of a happy existence after death.<sup>19</sup>

So in our world today, you and I are offered a much greater variety of religions from which to choose than the times of your parents and their parents. In this country and in Western Societies, we have access to knowledge and world religions and lifestyles from which we can personally choose. And with these seemingly endless choices, sooner or later we end up wanting a deity Who is more personal. We want our God to more closely relate to our daily needs and somehow reach into our sense of loneliness in the universe. We want God to be more personal.

By now, with Jesus gone and Paul having started the church in Corinth, there were hundreds, and eventually thousands of non-Jews from other nations who were following Christ. Paul, extensively in his writings, was arguing that Jesus was setting aside all those Jewish laws and life-style rituals and replacing them with a moral code of the heart.

Jesus had redefined religion so that anyone, from any country, could follow. But with all of new religions available in this cosmopolitan culture outside of Palestine, how was any one religion to last?

The **Jews** were asking this question, fearing their entire Jewish culture would disappear by being absorbed

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<sup>18</sup> The god, Mithras, supposedly was born from a rock on December 25<sup>th</sup> and calculated the winter solstice (a critical turning point in the solar year when daylight hours begin to lengthen.)

<sup>19</sup> Isis, like the feminine word in Israel’s wisdom literature for wisdom, personified wisdom and learning. She seemed to offer the individual worshiper far more comfort than the official state religions of Greece or Rome. Today, even our newspapers regularly have articles on the astrological signs – although the writer of the zodiac signs material in *Art Voice* is among the best of the writers.

into the cosmopolitan culture. The **Gentile Christians** were asking how their religion of Christianity could possibly survive with all these other religious beliefs and philosophies flourishing around them.

The people in that church in Corinth were getting it from all sides. They had friends, relatives and neighbors who were enthusiastic followers and volunteers in the state religions and private club religious cults. They were also hearing criticism from some people who were Jewish who disagreed with their claims that Jesus was the Messiah for all humanity.<sup>20</sup>

Each one of us today wonders how *we* can maintain our faith and have it make sense as a minority belief in our own cosmopolitan society. We obviously live in a culture where anything goes and most people act as if nothing really matters – as long as you don’t hurt others or infringe on their rights or feelings. But there are some clues to help us today in what helped Judaism survive and why Christianity survived amidst the competition of the Hellenistic cosmopolitan culture.

Going into the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, most all Jews believed that three things defined Judaism – setting them apart from the surrounding religions of the empire.

The first essential hallmark of Judaism was a radical and uncompromising commitment to the One God. This was simple **monotheism** – the belief that there is only one true God.

The second core element of Judaism was **their law – the Torah**.<sup>21</sup> They thought that if people obeyed these regulations, God would befriend and protect them.

The third cornerstone of the Jewish faith was **having a land of their own**, a sense of place in the world – symbolized, in part, by their **temple**. They believed that God had given them the land of Canaan and it should be inhabited by their people and ruled by their Kings or Priests. The problem was that their temple-oriented religion kept being destroyed by the nations governing them.<sup>22</sup> So for the first half of the first century, to be a Jew

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<sup>20</sup> They were talking to people at work who were very articulate about life’s meanings and how to live with more wisdom and closer attention to morality.

<sup>21</sup> The first five books of what we call “The Old Testament” had not only the ten commandments but also a world view consisting of an entire organization of regulations – attempting to create a (dualistic) world view where everything had to fit into the categories of “holy” and “unholy” or “clean” and “unclean.” This whole scheme of law classifications was the covenant (or agreement) with God.

<sup>22</sup> It was actually only a short span of about 100 years that the Jews actually existed as an independent nation, governing

was to generally (1) believe in the *One God*; (2) have the *Torah* (the law); (3) and the *temple* in the midst of *their nation*.

Talk about diversity, in Judaism. From before Jesus' time and throughout His life and beyond, there were several groups of Jews (besides the general population who didn't participate exclusively in one group or another.<sup>23</sup> But thinking about the "types" of Jewish people in the first century is exactly like referring to the "religion" of the general population of the United States today. How would you describe American religion?

Well, you'd start by saying that we have many Christian denominations like Methodists, Baptists, AME Zionists, Wesleyans, Presbyterians, United Church of Christ, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Unitarians, the Unity Church, Amish, Mennonites and Seventh-Day Adventists. Not to mention other faith expressions such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. But then there is Scientology, the Shriners, 12 Step Support Groups and any gathering of volunteers that defers to a higher power and who find meaning in life by devoting hours of their time and their money to community causes and commitments. "What is religion?" one might ask when ticking off a list as diverse as that.<sup>24</sup>

What were the groups of religion in the Palestinian Israeli culture? There were the **Samaritans** who lived and worshiped in the northern lands of Israel.<sup>25</sup> There were **Essenes** – a small commune of devout religious families who dedicated their lives to preserving Jewish scriptures and ran their commune by the Dead Sea.<sup>26</sup>

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themselves. They only governed themselves as an independent nation from 164 BCE (in their successful Maccabean revolt against Antiochus) to 63 BCE. It was then that their self-rule ended when a ruling Priest asked Rome for help and his job title was changed from a King to an Ethnarch, a provincial governor. From then on, until modern-day Israel appropriated a section of Palestine in 1967,<sup>22</sup> Israel was always to be ruled by other occupying governments.

<sup>23</sup> we know this from the New Testament and many other historical sources like Flavius Josephus

<sup>24</sup> I define religion as whatever it is to which a person commits their **belief**, their **time** and **money** that turns out to be what is most important to them. With a definition as broad as that, I would say that some people's religion is their career and getting as much money as they can. Others live as if Jesus Christ is the central element in their life. Still others devote so much of their lives to spectator sports or a community service organization that one could reasonably conclude that it must be their religion.

<sup>25</sup> They were despised by the Southern Jews because they had intermarried with non-Jews.

<sup>26</sup> from 140 BCE<sup>26</sup> to 68 CE John the Baptist was thought to be

Another Jewish group was the **Zealots**. They were passionately committed to Jewish religious and political independence and they wanted to evict the Romans more than anything else.<sup>27</sup>

The **Sadducees** were members of a political party – mostly consisting of wealthy landowners. They controlled the priesthood and their Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin.<sup>28</sup>

There were **Priests** (some of whom were in the Sadducee party) who ran and officiated the temple cult and the national religion. They dedicated their lives to doing rituals at the temple.

Then there were the **Pharisees**, who were given a negative image by the Gospels but they were radically different than the priests. They, and their Scribes who were the Pharisee's lawyers, tried to **take the Jewish religion out of the temple and make it portable**.<sup>29</sup> Paul was a Pharisee and was taught by the famous Gamaliel.<sup>30</sup>

What was remarkable about the Pharisees is that **they believed in progressive learning**. They understood that through time, new insights could be gained in ethics as we discover new issues and new life-experiences that bring up new ethical questions that had not yet been addressed by previous generations. Because of their (1) **portable religion** that could be conducted without all the temple rituals and cult and (2) their philosophy of **progressive learning in religion** – the Pharisees were the only group<sup>31</sup>

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among their number. They were the ones who hid the OT scriptures, and their own writings on rules for their religious commune, in eleven different caves that we didn't find until 1947. (But it was the unearthing of the Nag Hamadi Gnostic Library in Egypt that gave our Greek language studies the biggest boost in our understanding the New Testament.)

<sup>27</sup> They were the ones who officially went to war with the governing Romans in the year 66 CE.

<sup>28</sup> This group had the most to lose by rebelling against the Romans.

<sup>29</sup> They thought that instead of being involved with all the temple rituals and ceremony, the devout Jew ought to have prayers, dietary restrictions and discussions about the laws and prophets in their everyday lives. They devoted their entire lives to practicing the Jewish religion without the temple ceremonies – substituting rituals at home in place of the temple cult.

<sup>30</sup> Gamaliel, a well known and respected Pharisee, was an advocate of religious tolerance. He actually used his position in Judaism to protect the early Jesus movement. Gamaliel was also one of Paul's teachers. In comparison, **Sadducees** just believed in the first five books of the Old Testament Law and ignored the prophets. They didn't believe in the afterlife or heaven. Like Jesus, the **Pharisees** believed in the law and the prophets and the spirit world beyond the grave.

<sup>31</sup> (besides the Samaritans who lived in the northern lands away

that survived in Judaism after the Romans slaughtered the Priests and demolished their temple cult and city in the year 70.<sup>32</sup>

Today *we* are living in a cosmopolitan society and we clearly have access to almost any educational resource or topic at our fingertips through the Internet. Air travel and global satellite-fed telecommunications have made our world smaller. We have almost immediate access to any culture, religion, movement, theory or gathering of people in the world. We can choose to be a Vegan vegetarian; a Trappist monk; an artsy “gothic” hedonist (who lives only for the next piercing or tattoo); a Christian fundamentalist; an agnostic; a dedicated career-workaholic; an American meditating nutrition-conscious Buddhist; or a barfly.

With so many choices and the freedom to choose the course of any part of our lives in this democracy, we would be wise to talk about more than just career choices with ourselves and our children.

What is it about your personal faith that you feel is worth recommending to your children, as well as other fellow travelers for their journeys through life? How can your faith survive in this pluralistic culture that is so similar to the cosmopolitan Hellenistic culture in which the Corinthian Christians lived?<sup>33</sup> What are the four most important things *you* tell others to take with them through life?<sup>34</sup>

Like the Prophets who scorned the priests and their regimented rituals, Jesus taught us how God looks at our heart – teaching us that loving even our enemies is something that translates into any culture. Paul,<sup>35</sup> spent most of his writing time showing how we don’t have to have a religion that gets its security from conformity to ritual and laws in order to have a relationship with God. One theme we’ll hear repeatedly in Paul’s letters is that if

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from Jerusalem)

<sup>32</sup> The Pharisees went on and continued to collect and write the Mishnah, (their commentaries on the scriptures which was compiled by around 200 CE. They also assembled their vast compendium of rabbinic scholarship of 2.5 million words in the Talmud<sup>32</sup> by the sixth century after Christ.

<sup>33</sup> If you were to get in a time machine and go back to them, knowing everything you know now, how would you help them face the issues of Christianity and the values of the culture?

<sup>34</sup> I usually tell children: (1) Making God special is the beginning of all wisdom, (2) God loves you (3) Always do the best at whatever you are doing, (4) Always remember other people’s feelings

<sup>35</sup> The former Jewish Pharisee and multi-cultural Christian debater

making it with God is about being good enough at following the religious laws – we’re done for. And even the surviving Judaism of the Pharisees showed us that *if* our religion isn’t anchored to a church building or a set of rules, but has a sense of progressive learning, our religion will survive.

What I’m suggesting is that the institutional church, with its commitment to its buildings and property and a tidy list of what is or isn’t “Christian,” is shrinking. The average size of a Protestant Church is 250 members. Young adults who are in college or in their early career years, are not attending churches so how is it that they will find God?

You already know that people *tend* to gather where they are comfortable and are hearing confirmed what they already believe. But who is to say what *we* should believe? What is it that we can take of our faith – portably – into any country, city, career or relationship? With all of the cultural diversity we’ve seen, and to what we will be exposed in our lives ahead, what real and true sense of the presence of a personal God do we have that doesn’t sound trendy and so simplified that it’s embarrassing to even bring it up in a group of intelligent well-read people who are open to truth? What is the truth that will set us free? That seems to be the question for which our “religion” must have an answer.

I believe we’ll have more of a sense of how our God is personal in our lives as we stay open to these passages in Corinthians. As with the rest of scripture, I believe that in various ways, we will hear God’s voice for our lives in the passages which describe God’s activity in the lives of people in that church community. When we identify with the Christians in Corinth, we’re going to see their progression of learning and how they applied their faith to their life choices.

I also believe that meaningful change only happens in community where there is a context of support and commitment to learning in our faith as we deal with the issues of our own day. Times and issues change, from one culture to another, and there aren’t a handful of rules that answer every single cultural ethical question that emerges on the scene. But I believe that just as we will see how God’s Spirit moved Paul and that little church to deal with *their* issues, God’s Spirit will do the same with us.

Only kindness matters, so we learn how *they* struggled in their time and then how *we* can struggle in applying that truth of love to what is before us. How God will speak to us, in our own community, remains to be seen. ■

