

First Corinthians Bible Study

Corinth was the Las Vegas of the Roman Empire

It was the capital city of the Roman province of Achaia (in Greece). It was considered to be the bawdy counterpoint to the intellectual center of Athens (50 miles away). It had been settled by freed slaves in 44 BC. It was predominantly Gentile (with a few Jews, such as Prisca & Aquilla, who had moved to Corinth from Rome during a time of Roman persecution of the Jews). The city was economically diverse, with many from the lower end of the social scale. It was a really important port city. It connected the Aegean and Adriatic seas with a narrow strip of land in between, so the Corinthians built a port on each sea, with a nice road connecting the 9 miles between each port, so that ships could unload at one port, travel 9 miles, and reload on a new ship in the other sea. Corinth was famous for its port system, and also inundated with sailors and had many industries related to providing “comforts” to the sailors passing through. Corinth was basically the Vegas of the ancient world, famous for its “pleasure industry” with lots of theaters, temples to Roman deities, casinos, and brothels. Corinthians had a reputation throughout the Roman world of being sexually promiscuous, and having an “anything goes” attitude.

Corinth was a famous producer of Corinthian bronze, which was highly valued. It also held an annual athletic tournament called the “Isthmian Games,” 2nd only in the world to the Athenian Olympics. The winners of the games would be crowned with laurels. This is where Paul uses imagery of “finishing the race” and “receiving a crown” to speak about faith using the language of this important cultural feature.

Corinth considered itself a haven for the “Nuevo riche,” offering upward social mobility for the newly rich, in spite of family history. It prided itself on being open to new ideas and tolerant of diversity. By Paul’s time, Corinth had come to be associated with lavish lifestyles, hyper consumerism and consumption, and social competition among the elite.

Paul’s Relationship with Corinth

According to Acts 18, Paul stayed arrived in Corinth during his second missionary journey, and stayed there for 18 months between 50-53 CE. He lived with Prisca (or Priscilla) and Aquila, a married couple, who were Jewish Christians and tent makers by vocation, just like Paul. Paul, Timothy, and Silas shared the gospel with the Corinthians and formed the Corinthian church, which was ethnically and socially diverse. Most of Paul’s converts were Gentiles, though not all (Crispus and Sosthenes were leaders of the local synagogue), and most of the converts were from the lower classes, though not all (Gaius had a house big enough to host the congregation’s worship, and Erastus was the city treasurer).

First Corinthian’s Lost Prequel

After 18 months, Paul continued his missionary journey, he wrote a LOST first letter to the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 5: 9-11), where he urged them to avoid associating with sexually immoral Christians. The Corinthians sent “Chloe’s people” (1:11) to visit Paul, and he received a letter from the church asking him many questions (7:1, 25, 8: 1, 4, 12: 1, 16: 1, 12). This letter was delivered by Stephanas, Fortunatys, and Achaicus (16: 15-18) who not only delivered the letter but shared other reports with Paul as well. In response to all of this, Paul wrote what we now know as “First Corinthians” while he was in Ephesus, between the years of 53-57.

Major Themes

1. **Church Unity** (in response to the problem of major divisions in the congregation)
2. **Wisdom and Power** (the likely cause of divisions in the congregation, people want to identify with the human leaders whom they deem as the most wise and powerful)

3. **Christ Crucified** (the people failed to realize what the counter cultural message of the cross means for their daily lives. Paul fears that the Corinthians –who are so averse to suffering and hardship- identify only with the Risen Christ, and not with the cross)
4. **Resurrection of the Body** (for the dualistic understanding of Greek philosophy the body was dirty and the spirit was holy, Paul taught the Corinthians the counter cultural reality of our faith, which views Jesus as but the first fruits of the resurrection. 1 Corinthians 15 is an important chapter in our understanding of death and resurrection).
5. **Christian Freedom** (some Corinthians took Paul’s writings about the importance of living by the Spirit, rather than according to the law to radical extremes which resulted in them boasting about visiting prostitutes or engaging in incestuous relationships. Paul seeks to clarify exactly what he means by Christian Freedom. Christians should ask not “am I allowed to do this?” but rather, “is this a good thing to do?”)

Structure

In 1:10-4:21, Paul warns against division and quarrels and spells out what it means to be a “Church of God.”

In chapters 5-6, Paul deals specifically with a concerning case of sexual impropriety and other legal disputes.

From chapters 7-16, Paul addresses the concerns that the Corinthians have raised one by one, beginning with the formula “Now concerning...”

1/25 First Corinthians 1-4

Chapter 1

Vs. 1-9, This is Paul’s greeting to the church, which reflects a common style in in ancient world. The writers of the letter (Paul and Sosthenes), address those to whom the letter is written, and remind the church in Corinth of their connection to the global church (they are “called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ). They begin with greeting the church with Grace (the Greek address) and Peace (the Jewish address), both of which come from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul then shifts into a prayer of thanksgiving for the church, which highlights themes that he will touch upon later in the letter: All, not just a few, have enough speech and knowledge to be confident in the quality of their faith. All, not just the elite, are blessed with spiritual gifts. Everyone strengthens the whole church through their testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ. This prayer looks forward to the day of the resurrection of the dead, when Christ will return! This greeting takes on a pastoral, reassuring tone.

Vs. 10-17, Paul immediately shifts to addressing a serious concern that “Chloe’s people” brought to him, that there was significant quarreling among the congregation, that they had broken themselves up into factions based on who had baptized them. Obviously, the reputation of the one who baptizes doesn’t make a rip of difference in the grand scheme of things, because it is God God’s self who does the actual work of the baptism. Greeks were obsessed with acquiring more and more honor during this time frame, and the idea was that there was only a set amount of honor to go around. So, it seems that the church had begun to apply this guiding principle to its congregational life. Paul’s tone is one of disgust, he’s so disgusted by this notion that he can’t even keep his own facts straight about how many people he actually baptized while he was in Corinth. Paul appears to be clear about his own call by God to build the church through sharing the gospel, rather than through sharing the sacraments. Not every servant of Christ is called to the exact same work in Christ’s body. *Paul urges the church to be united in the same mind and in the same purpose.*

Vs. 18-31, Paul now reveals to the congregation how absurd their pursuit of power and wisdom (which were held as high virtues in this time in Greece) contradicts the gospel message that they proclaim of Christ crucified. God chose what was weak and foolish (the crucifixion of Christ, and the lower class Corinthians themselves) to shame the wise and powerful. God located Godself with that which the world despised and mocked by placing Jesus on the cross. This is a struggle for both Jews and Greeks to wrap their minds around, as Jews want God to display power through signs and Greeks have endlessly pursued that which would give deep wisdom, and neither feel altogether comfortable with a God who is most manifest in the weakness and foolishness of the cross. Those who have come to faith cling to this message of Christ crucified as the power and wisdom of God, for God's weakness is stronger than human strength and God's foolishness wiser than human wisdom. Paul says that God works in such countercultural ways so that no one might boast, for the only thing we should be boasting in is the thing that unites us all- Christ Jesus, the Lord, our wisdom and strength!

Chapter 2

Paul recalls his original visit to Corinth, and how he knew nothing except for Christ crucified, and how God used him (weak and fearful as he was) and demonstrated power in him through the Spirit, so that their faith would be based on the power of God rather than some fancy words. God's wisdom is the TRUE, ancient wisdom, revealed to believers through God's own Spirit. If the rulers of this age had truly understood God's wisdom, they would have known that Jesus was the Lord and would not have crucified him. God reveals true wisdom to believers through the Spirit, and the Spirit helps the church understand the gifts that they have been given by God. Gift discernment is serious spiritual business and not to be taken lightly.

Chapter 3

Paul says that he has to start with only the basics for the church at Corinth, not the deep wisdom they crave, because they are infants in the faith (as evidenced by their quarrelling). Their congregational life is not based on what Paul did or what Apollos did, but rather what God did in Jesus Christ. Both Paul and Apollos worked with a common purpose, to build a strong congregation that will stand the testing o time. Each leader of the church lays a new layer of faith on top of the foundation which Paul laid, which was the foundation of Jesus Christ himself.

Paul speaks of the whole congregation as God's temple (the people would have seen many earthly, physical structures built for various Roman deities all around them). The congregation as a whole is the dwelling place of God's Spirit. Therefore, Paul offers a strong warning for the person who tries to destroy God's temple –the congregation! Paul will speak of the individual as God's temple in chapter 6.

Chapter 4

Vs. 1-7, Instead of as a source for boasting, Paul urges the congregation to think of its spiritual leaders as "stewards of God's mysteries." Even the leaders are supposed to be viewed as SERVANTS. This is a radical departure from what the culture taught. Spiritual leaders should be trustworthy, Paul says he thinks he is trustworthy and doesn't need to be judged by humans because God will judge his heart and offer commendation where appropriate to Paul and everyone else when Christ comes (keep in mind, Paul expected Christ to come again any day). This related directly to Paul's argument about boasting- improper boasting was seeking human approval, when the only approval that really matters is God's. Paul says that people should not view themselves as better than anyone else, for everything they have and believe has been given to them as a gift from God, and if it's a gift, then there's no need to boast. God's grace, which Paul is talking about, is the foundation of the Christian life, a life which should be lived in light of and in response to God's grace. There is no room for our boasting, for God has done everything that matters on our behalf.

Vs 8-21, Though babies in the faith, the Corinthians had this popular notion that their faith made them kings and gave them many prestigious benefits (the prosperity gospel is not a new invention). Paul debunks this mythology verse by verse, sharing with them what TRUE discipleship looks like through the unglamorous lens of the apostles' lives. The true leaders of the Church, those who should be counted among the kings of the faith, are instead made fools for Christ, as if condemned men living as a spectacle for all to mock. Rather than living royally, the life of faith entails suffering for that faith and returning evil with good, following the example of Christ himself: *"When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly."* Paul sends the church his beloved son in the faith, Timothy, to mentor them and to model Christian faith and living for them. In this culture, children were expected to learn not only their father's trade, but also to learn proper behavior from their fathers. Paul draws on this expectation when he urges the Corinthians to imitate him, for while they've had many guardians like Sylvanus, Apollos, and Timothy, their father –the one who participated in their birth- is Paul. Arrogance is at the root of their problems in the Corinthian church. Paul closes these opening chapters as a father with a warning for his misbehaving children. Their behavior will determine whether he comes again to them with discipline or encouragement.

2/1 First Corinthians 5-8

2/8 First Corinthians 9-11

2/15 First Corinthians 12-14

2/22 First Corinthians 15-16