

XVIII. A Second Look at First Corinthians

September 3/5, 2013

1 Corinthians 1:1-11:1

Aim: To review the introduction to 1 Corinthians and recap the first 10 chapters.

Last year, we began our study in 1 Corinthians, covering 1:1 through 11:1. This school year we will complete our study in First Corinthians. This lesson is a reprisal of the introduction to First Corinthians, to remind everyone of the background and issues surrounding the letter. After introducing the epistle, we will do a brief recap of the first 10 chapters.

A. Establishing the Corinthian Church (Acts 18)

1. The City of Corinth

Greece is divided geographically into two parts. The southern part, the Peloponnesus, is attached to the northern by a very narrow, four-mile-wide isthmus. On the western side are the Gulf of Corinth and the port city of Lechaem. On the eastern side are the Saronic Gulf and the port city of Cenchreae. In the middle of the isthmus, to the south, is Corinth, situated on a commanding plateau. In ancient times all north and south overland traffic, including that to and from Athens, had to pass through Corinth, making the city a wide-open boomtown vibrant with people.

Corinth's geographical position on the narrow land bridge (4 miles across) between the Greek peninsula and the Peloponnesus was crossed by many people. It was a strategic center of commerce by land and by sea. Sea travelers and mercantile goods passed both ways across the Corinthian isthmus; the seas to the south of the Peloponnesus were dangerous to shipping. Rather than attempt the risky voyage around the southern land mass, merchants and the military often transported their goods, men, and hardware overland. Most captains even chose to carry their ships overland on skids or rollers across the narrow isthmus, directly past Corinth. This procedure was quicker, more economical, and much safer than sailing 250 miles around the peninsula. In fact, the isthmus came to be known as *dialcos*, which means 'the place of dragging across.' In peacetime, the city of Corinth controlled this lucrative traffic. Today a canal—envisioned by Perisander in the 6th century BC, begun by the Roman emperor Nero in the first century AD, but not completed until the end of nineteenth century—connects the two gulfs across the isthmus, greatly facilitating maritime travel.

In classical times Corinth had been a rival of Greece. The Roman invasion of Greece, however, reduced the city to rubble in 146 BC. About a century later Julius Caesar re-established the city, but as a Roman colony. Corinth was the capital of the province of Achaia and was ruled by its own Roman proconsul. The city became a melting pot for Greeks, Syrians, Jews, and resettled Roman army veterans, providing a rich mix of ethnicity and religion. As an accessible travel center, it would draw all the itinerant philosophers and rhetoricians on the circuit.

Corinth was also successful as an entertainment center. The two great athletic festivals of that day were the Olympian and the Isthmian games. Every two years the Isthmian games brought competitors and multitudes of spectators to Corinth. Furthermore, Corinth was noted for its manufacture of bronzes according to a secret formula. The city was a wealthy cosmopolitan sea-port, with a reputation for being at the cutting edge of Mediterranean life and culture.

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Thriving commerce often translates into thriving debauchery, but Corinth took debauchery and licentiousness to new heights – or depths! The other pagan cities of the day acknowledged Corinth's moral corruption by coining the word *corinthiazesthai* – to live like a Corinthian. This word came to represent gross immorality and drunken debauchery; the name of the city became synonymous with moral depravity.

Like most Greek cities, Corinth had an acropolis (literally, 'high city'), called Acrocorinth, which was used as a place of defense and for pagan worship. From its top on a clear day Athens can be seen, some 45 miles away. Situated on a 2,000-foot high granite mound, Acrocorinth was large enough to hold all the population of Corinth and of its surrounding farmlands in time of siege. It also held a famous temple to Aphrodite, goddess of love. The temple normally housed some one thousand priestesses, ritual prostitutes, who each night would come down into Corinth and ply their trade among the many foreign travelers and the local men.

Corinth appears to have been an exceptionally 'religious' city. Religion was plentiful and the tide of iniquity flowed on unabated. In fact, the religions of Corinth were part of the problem. A temple to the goddess of love and fertility, Aphrodite, was there. A thousand priestesses plied the trade of prostitution as part of the religious rites. Long-haired male prostitutes were also a common sight. There were many temples for the gods, shrines for the Roman imperial family, and mystery cults. All this presented a problem for the members of the church in Corinth, many of whom remained enmeshed in 'temple culture.'

Religion and politics were inextricably linked. All the cults of the gods and the mysteries expressed solidarity with local civic life and reverence towards the Roman emperors upon whom all provincial life depended. Only the Jews were excused from participating in the sacrifices. At the beginning the Christians may also have enjoyed this liberty since officially they were viewed as part of Judaism.

By the time of Paul's visit, about a hundred years after its re-foundation, Corinth was a bustling port city, a dazzling Roman city of cosmopolitan character and brash manner. Its vigorous cultic life, however, was an ever-present threat to those Gentiles who as Christians must turn their backs on the gods, the temples, and their priests. Archaeological excavations have revealed many evidences of a city lifestyle devoted to entertainment and self-indulgence. As citizens of the 21st century, we would have found much that was instantly familiar had we been with Paul in Corinth.

2. The Church of Corinth (Acts 18)

Paul arrived in Corinth in the autumn of 50 AD and his initial ministry occupied about a year and a half. On his arrival from Athens he stayed with Aquila and Priscilla, who were fellow-Jews, fellow-tentmakers, and fellow-believers. During this period Paul taught the gospel to Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue (Acts 18:1-4). When he was rejoined from Macedonia by Silas and Timothy, Paul intensified his ministry in Corinth which now extended to the Gentile population (Acts 18:5-8).

Those whom Paul addresses in the letter would therefore have been a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, from both monotheistic and pagan backgrounds, and from the little evidence we have it is likely that they would have represented a wide social range.

Acts 18:12 tells us that Gallio occupied the office of Roman proconsul during Paul's first visit to Corinth. An independent inscription from Delphi regarding proconsul Gallio enables historians

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to date the church-planting visit to 51-52 AD. After a ministry of eighteen months, Paul left Corinth in the spring of 52 AD with Priscilla and Aquila and went to Ephesus. Leaving his friends there, he returned to Palestine (Acts 18:12-22).

B. Interacting with the Corinthian Church

1. Non-Pauline Interactions

Silas and Timothy remained in Corinth when Paul left in 52 AD, though it is not clear how long they remained. We lose track of Silas for the next dozen or so years until he appears in Rome as Peter's amanuensis (1 Pe. 5:12). Sometime after Paul came to Ephesus, Timothy rejoined him from Corinth (1 Cor. 16:10; Acts 19:22).

A sequence of Christian leaders visited Corinth during Paul's stay in Ephesus. First came Apollos, the Jew from Alexandria. Apollos had heard about the preaching of John the Baptist. Apollos did not grasp that Christ was the fulfillment of John's preaching and teaching until he came to the synagogue in Ephesus where Priscilla and Aquila 'showed him the way of God more accurately' (Acts 18:26). He was encouraged to journey to Achaia and became the second pastor of the infant Corinthian church. Paul arrived in Ephesus shortly after Apollos left. Apollos created a great impression when he came to Corinth, both for his eloquence and the power of his spiritual fervor (Acts 18:24-25, 28). In 1 Corinthians Paul addresses the new fascinations of the Corinthians in rhetoric, wisdom, and 'spiritual' ministry. It is possible that Apollos' ministry had unintentionally inflamed these expressions of ministry in Corinth. Paul must address the issues of wisdom and rhetoric in chapters 1-4 and 'spiritual' ministry in chapters 12-14.

Sometime later Corinth was favored by a visit from Peter (Cephas) and his wife (9:5). From 33-49 AD Peter had been the apostle to the land of Israel, proclaiming the gospel in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. After the Jerusalem Council in 49 AD Peter began to travel outside the land of Israel. He probably revisited the churches in Palestine and most likely came once more to Antioch. It is possible that he traveled through Asia Minor before coming to the Corinth sometime after 52 AD. It is possible that Peter's visit, like Apollos', also unsettled the Corinthians in regard to Paul, though in different ways. Peter may have created the impression that since Paul had not been a disciple of the historical Jesus he was not fully an apostle. This would explain why Paul needed to insist on his genuine apostleship (9:1-3; 15:8-11).

Barnabas, Paul's colleague in Antioch and partner on his First Missionary Journey, also may have visited Corinth at some point (cp. 9:6). The coming of Apollos, Peter, and Barnabas showed the Corinthians that Paul was by no means the only preacher or Christian leader.

It also appears that a local leader or leaders had arisen who were taking the church in a rather different direction from the founding apostle (3:10, 19; 4:18-19). These have created their own loyal followings, against one another and against Paul (4:6). These new leaders are teaching a wisdom-based message, not Christ crucified and risen. Paul faces these troublemakers with his admonitions in the letter, but also by urging the Corinthians to recognize responsible local people like Stephanas (16:15-18) and welcoming warmly Timothy when he comes (16:10-11).

2. Pauline Interactions

The following is my [DSB] proposed sequence of events outlining Paul's complex interactions with the Corinthian church from 50-56 AD.

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a) Events Leading to the Writing of First Corinthians

- Paul plants the church of Corinth during his Second Missionary Journey, staying in Corinth eighteen months from about Sep-50 to Mar-52 AD (Acts 18:1-18).
- Paul departs Corinth via Cenchreae, leaves Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus, and returns to Antioch via Jerusalem, ending the Second Missionary Journey around May-52 AD (Acts 18:18-22).
- After a short stay in Antioch, Paul begins the Third Missionary Journey (Aug-52 AD), returning overland through Galatia to Ephesus as promised, arriving in the spring of 53 AD (Acts 18:23; 19:1).
- In Ephesus, Paul learns from Aquila and Priscilla about Apollos, who had gone on to minister in Corinth (Acts 18:24-28). Paul apparently approves (later) of Apollos and his ministry (1 Cor. 3:5-6; 16:12).
- While Paul is in Ephesus, apparently Peter visits Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12; cp. 9:5), and also possibly Barnabas (cp. 9:6).
- During Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus, he writes the 'lost' or 'previous' letter (1 Cor. 5:9), which was also apparently corrective in nature.
- By the spring of 56 AD, news regarding the Corinthian church reaches Paul from a variety of sources:
 - Members of Chloe's household report that divisions exist in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11).
 - Apollos has returned to Ephesus at some point, perhaps embarrassed at being set up as a rival to Paul (1 Cor. 1:12), and gets to know Paul (1 Cor. 16:12).
 - A delegation from Corinth – composed of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus – comes to Paul in Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:17-18), likely carrying a letter with specific questions (1 Cor. 7:1). Perhaps some of the questions were prompted by the 'lost' letter.
- Given all these sources of information, and in response to the questions in the letter, Paul writes 1 Corinthians from Ephesus in early 56 AD. The epistle is likely carried directly back to Corinth by the delegation of Stephanas.
- Paul plans to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost 56 AD; after Pentecost Paul plans to travel via Macedonia to Corinth where he hopes to spend the winter (1 Cor. 16:5-9); after that he intended to carry the Collection to Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1-4) and then go on to Rome and Spain (Acts 19:21; cp. Rom. 15:22-28).
- Meanwhile, Paul sends Timothy and Erastus from Ephesus into Macedonia (Acts 19:22), apparently intending that Timothy, at least, should work his way down to Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10-11).

b) Events Leading to the Writing of Second Corinthians

- Timothy apparently arrives in Corinth (after the delivery of First Corinthians?), but he is unable to enforce Paul's directions. Paul receives news (probably from Timothy upon his return to Ephesus) that the situation in Corinth has worsened rather than improved. Paul decides that an immediate, direct confrontation with the church is necessary. Therefore, Paul changes his travel plans, deciding to go directly to Corinth in the summer of 56 AD and expecting to visit Macedonia afterward (reversing his original plan), and then returning once again to Corinth (2 Cor. 1:15-16).
- This second visit of Paul to Corinth is a painful experience and a 'sorrowful visit' (2 Cor. 2:1). Opposition to Paul apparently comes to a head and one member in particular defies

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his authority (2 Cor. 2:5; 7:12). Unsuccessful in reconciling the church, Paul is deeply humiliated and leaves Corinth, scrapping his plan to travel to Macedonia, and returns directly to Ephesus (2 Cor. 1:17, 23).

- Back in Ephesus, Paul writes the ‘severe’ or ‘sorrowful’ letter (2 Cor. 2:3-4, 9; 7:8-9). This letter is carried to Corinth by the hand of Titus (2 Cor. 7:5-7), who is a stronger personality than Timothy.
- Paul is assailed by severe depression and extreme external danger in Ephesus (2 Cor. 1:8-11), perhaps a reference to the Ephesian riot (Acts 19:23ff).
- Paul leaves Ephesus (Acts 20:1) and travels to Troas, hoping to find Titus there, but he does not (2 Cor. 2:12-13).
- Paul hurries on to Macedonia (Philippi) where he finds Titus (2 Cor. 2:13; 7:5-6).
- Titus reports that the severe letter has been effective. Most of the Corinthians have repented and were eager for Paul’s return. Further, they had disciplined the one who had wronged Paul, and he, too, had repented. Paul was overjoyed at the news (2 Cor. 7:6-16).
- With a third visit to Corinth now on his mind (2 Cor. 12:14; 13:1), Paul writes 2 Corinthians in autumn 56 AD from Macedonia (2 Cor. 2:13; 7:5-6; 8:1; 9:2-4).
- Paul sends Titus back to Corinth with two others to deliver the epistle and assist with the Collection (2 Cor. 8:16-9:5).
- Paul visits Corinth for the third time and spends three months there during the winter of 56-57 AD (Acts 20:2-3). During his stay in Corinth, he writes the epistle to the Romans (cp. Rom. 15:25-28), delivered by Phoebe of Cenchreae (Rom. 16:1), the port city of Corinth.

F. F. Bruce suggests that the epistle of 2 Corinthians was written in two parts. Chapters 1-9 were written first and delivered to Corinth by Titus in the autumn of 56 AD. In this letter, Paul explained that he sent Titus first instead of coming himself to avoid causing pain. Paul wears his heart on his sleeve and enlarges on the hardships and splendors of apostolic service. Paul tells them he will soon return to Corinth for the Collection; meanwhile, he is sending Titus back with two friends to help.

According to Bruce’s theory, the second visit of Titus to Corinth did not go as well as his first. Some members in Corinth may have felt pressure to give generously like the Macedonians. Meanwhile certain visitors (‘superlative apostles’) in Corinth had begun to undermine Paul’s prestige by insisting upon the authority of Jerusalem. Therefore, Paul follows up with another letter, sent a little bit later and composed of chapters 10-13 of Second Corinthians. This theory attempts to explain why there is an apparent change of tone and emphasis between chapters 1-9 and 10-13 of Second Corinthians.

C. Characterizing the Corinthian Church

There are many evidences in the epistle of the cultural ‘squeeze’ which had the potential to suffocate the young church. From their pagan background, many of the new converts would still have been attached to the phenomena of their old religion, including ecstatic speech and cult-prostitution. Pagan temples were at the heart of Corinthian social life.

What was the problem? Contamination and confusion. The Corinthian church was contaminated by society’s sins and confused by its thinking. Today’s church finds herself in a frighteningly secular world, one in which paganism is aggressive and militant. Opportunities are

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great, but alas, the church often seems to be as contaminated and confused as the church of Corinth. Paul's medicine for Corinth will do us good. He bathes the contamination and the confusion of the church in the glory of Christ crucified.

1. Authority

The most basic problem was the opposition to Paul's authority as an apostle. In his absence various unnamed persons have arisen to seize control of the church. These are rejecting the authority of Paul as an apostle of Christ to direct their thinking and behavior. Paul responds to this challenge throughout the letter (cp. 1:1; 2:10-16; 3:10; 4:8-16; 9:1-3; 14:36-38; 15:8-11).

2. Division

The Corinthians are true believers, set apart and called to be holy, united with all other Christians. They are also a gifted congregation, enriched by God's grace in every area of their corporate life and ministry and eagerly awaiting Christ's return. But they are divided. Factionalism has become a serious problem in the life of the Corinthian church.

As the first part of the letter unfolds, it becomes clear there are four areas of controversy, which are encapsulated by particular 'buzz' words. The first is *knowledge*, which the Corinthians wanted to elevate to the primary position, but which Paul wants to reduce in its importance compared with love (1:5; 8:1, 7, 10-11; 12:8; 13:2, 8; 14:6). The second is *wisdom* around which most of the first two chapters rotate. Paul's argument is that their concept of wisdom is culturally conditioned and driven by the values of this world, whereas God's wisdom is located in the 'foolishness' of the cross (1:17, 19-24, 30; 2:1, 4-7, 13; 3:19; 12:8). *Power* is the next issue under discussion, as the Corinthian emphasis is so much on external excitement in the demonstration of the supernatural. Here the apostle's correction is to show that the greatest evidence of divine power is in the saving grace of God, generated by Christ's death (1:18-24; 2:4-5; 4:19-20; 5:4; 6:14; 12:10, 28-29; 14:11; 15:24, 43, 56). Lastly, Paul focuses on the vexed question of what it means to be *spiritual*, with his strong shift from impressive external displays of gifts or ecstasy, to the humble service of love which is the heart-beat of the gospel (2:13-15; 3:1; 9:11; 10:3-4; 12:1; 14:1, 37; 15:44, 46).

For these and other reasons (e.g., eschatology, see below), quarrels were developing in the church, as they divided over different human leaders (1:10-12; 3:3-9; 4:1-2), to whom Paul was definitely considered inferior by some. They were in danger of producing a boastful, 'puffed up' church, which was in danger of losing the gospel of Christ crucified altogether (1:29-31; 3:21; 4:6-7, 18-19; 8:1).

3. Eschatology

In the past three years a rather different eschatology from that which Paul taught had come to the surface in Corinth. We know Paul's eschatological perspectives when present in Corinth since these may be seen in First and Second Thessalonians, which were written from Corinth. But the Corinthians appear to have switched their focus from the future to the present. For the Corinthians 'wisdom' had come to be associated with power and the appearance of things. Paul must remind them that the believers' hope is directed to the future, to glorious things which eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor the human heart imagined (2:6-9). Paul must remind them that 'Christ crucified' is the 'wisdom and power of God' that overturns all human ideas of wisdom

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and power and which (1:7-2:5), when apprehended, opens the way to God's coming glorious kingdom.

There seemed to be claims that they were already living above the normal, material experience of Christians in this present world and had somehow already entered into the blessings of the eternal kingdom, making the future resurrection of the body irrelevant and redundant. This over-realized eschatology which tried to bring all the blessings of the 'not yet' into the 'now' was attractive and exciting at first, but would ultimately lead to disillusionment and decline as its expectations could never be fulfilled in this world.

Related to this, it seems, are the doubts of 'some' in regard to the future resurrection of the body (15:12). Possibly these doubts about future resurrection stemmed from a combination of Greek skepticism about the resurrection of the body and the Corinthians' new sense that in their new experience of the Spirit God's purposes were for now, not later (over-realized eschatology – cp. 4:8; 14:36). If there is no resurrection of the body there will be no judgment of God in the end. If there is no judgment of God then there is no reason not to engage in bad behavior. The members of the church could, therefore, adopt an easy-going attitude to adultery and visiting prostitutes (5:1-2; 6:9-20). Furthermore, continued involvement in the temples and partaking of idol-sacrificed meat is not a problem (chapters 8-10) – if there is no judgment.

4. Worldliness

Arising from their flawed eschatology is their worldliness and individualism. Paul confronts them with these twin evils at many points. They are seen in the arrogance of upstart leaders and in the parading of 'gifts' of wisdom, knowledge, and eloquence (1:5; 8:1-3, 10; 10:12). Their enhanced sense of knowledge and wisdom blinded them to the effects their liberty (in attending temples) was having on weaker Christians. Yet they appeared not to care about the impact of their behavior on others. The preoccupation with 'spiritual gifts' that enhance the ego of the one who speaks demonstrates well the individualism of the Corinthians. Paul must teach them that the true evidence of the Spirit is conversion and that 'gifts' are given for the upbuilding of the 'body' of believers; if they are not used in 'love' for them they are quite valueless.

Their most serious problem was in not detaching themselves from the worldly ways of the society around them. They could not get 'decorinthianized.' In his previous lost letter, Paul specifically had warned them 'not to associate with immoral people' (5:9). Some of the Christians thought he meant for them not to associate with unbelievers who were immoral. But the sexually corrupt, the covetous, swindling, and idolatrous people to whom Paul referred to were fellow church members who refused to give up, or had fallen back into, the debauched lifestyle of Corinth (5:9-11).

Like many Christians today, the Corinthian believers had great difficulty in not mimicking the unbelieving and corrupt society around them. They wanted to be in God's kingdom while keeping one foot in the kingdom of this world. They wanted to have the blessings of the new life but hang on to the pleasures of the old.

5. Scandal

There were quite a number of aspects of the life of the Corinthians that would have provoked negative comment locally. One example is the adultery of a man with his stepmother, a sin not found even among pagans (5:1). A second is the practice of church members taking one another to the public courts. This told the wider community that these Christians were a disorderly lot!

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(6:1-8). A third example is the women prophets who are casting off the ‘sign’ of their submission in marriage (11:13-14). A fourth is the factions apparent at the Lord’s Supper (11:17-22), especially at the time of food shortage. A fifth is the chaos in the church meetings, with the babbling of tongues, prophets talking over the top of one another, and wives calling out questions across the meeting (14:26-40). Such behavior would have attracted serious criticism in a city like Corinth, where good order in cult groups was important. Surviving rules governing mystery cults reveal that disorder was unacceptable.

Paul accuses the Corinthians of creating ‘schisms’ (*schismata* – 1:10; 11:18; 12:25), chattering (14:26-40), and ‘indicting and accusing’! Paul was sensitive to the church developing a bad reputation. Many of Paul’s concerns found in First Corinthians arise from his awareness that the behavior of the Corinthians may have fallen below the standards that applied to other groups at that time. This is relevant. It is a scandal when standards of behavior in the church fall below those of the community.

D. Writing to the Corinthian Church

Hints scattered throughout the letter help us to understand how the letter came to be written. Paul received news from Corinth and the problems there from a variety of sources. The family or associates of Chloe, likely a member of the church, informed him about serious divisions within the fellowship (1:11). He received a delegation from the church in the persons of Stephanas, one of the few at Corinth whom Paul had baptized personally (1:16), Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16:17), and these men may have conveyed a letter from the church (7:1). In addition, Apollos had returned from Corinth and was with Paul in Corinth (16:12), and he no doubt also could corroborate the issues raised by the other sources. They told of factions, adultery, wives casting off their hair covering while prophesying, selfish actions at the Lord’s Supper, and doubts about the future resurrection.

Paul refers to an earlier letter (5:9), one which we do not have. Evidently, this letter was a stinging rebuke to the church for their careless living. It did not succeed in putting an end to their problems, but it did prompt a return letter from the church, in which they posed several questions. For the most part, however, these questions are couched in argumentative tones. Surely it is right for women to abstain from sexual relations (7:1)? Has a father really done wrong in betrothing his older-than-usual daughter for marriage (7:25)? Surely it is acceptable to dine in an idol-house (8:1)? Surely ‘tongue-speaking’ is the true sign of the Spirit (12:1)? How long must we put money aside for this collection (16:1)? Surely Apollos will come back to us soon (16:12)? 1 Corinthians is Paul’s response to their letter.

Paul could have dealt with the reports, then answered the questions. He might have done this in a few pages. Rather, he analyzes these reports and questions and finds five broad topics. These he presents as a sequence of pastoral sermons for the upbuilding of the church in Corinth and elsewhere. The topics are: 1) true wisdom and false (chapters 1-4); 2) holiness in sexuality (chapters 5-7); 3) idolatry and temple worship (chapters 8-10); 4) the gathered church (chapters 11-14); and 5) the abolition of death. In chapter 16 Paul outlines his future plans and finishes with strong words of encouragement. Paul wanted to bring their contamination and confusion into the light of the gospel, so it would be clear that Christianity works, even in a sophisticated, cosmopolitan, pagan society like Corinth. This church was both a marvel and a mess, and Paul’s

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concern was to help them clean up the mess so only the marvel would be left for the godless city of Corinth to see.

Not only does this letter challenge our contemporary eccentricities and inconsistencies, but it also teaches us a better way, ‘a still more excellent way’ of love and its powerful, penetrating message that delineates the nature of a true spirituality which can emanate only from the gospel of the crucified Savior.

E. Reviewing the Corinthian Letter (1 Cor. 1:1-11:1)

The epistle of 1 Corinthians is organized slightly differently than many other of Paul’s letters. Most of Paul’s letters divide into two parts – a “doctrinal” section and a “practical” section. However, in 1 Corinthians, Paul is dealing with so many problems and issues in the church that he more or less moves sequentially through the hot topics in Corinth. Some of the issues were brought to his attention by first-hand reports (Chloe’s household, Stephanas and his delegation, Apollos), and some were questions asked by the Corinthians themselves and delivered in a letter by Stephanas.

1. Salutation & Thanksgiving (1:1-9)

Like all of Paul’s letters, 1 Corinthians starts with a standard salutation that is customized for his audience and gives some indication of what he will be discussing in the body of the epistle. In this letter it is the theme of ‘holiness’ which is critical because of the *unholiness* of some of the Corinthian believers, both in their lovelessness and crass individualism within the congregation and their ongoing compromise with pagan idolatry and sexual practices in the wider community of pagan Corinth.

In Paul’s prayer of thanksgiving, he indicates that the Corinthian church is a gifted church, full of spiritual gifts and blessings. He also indicates another important theme of the epistle, which is the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ in the end.

2. Divisions in the Church (1:10-4:21)

The first main topic Paul addresses in the first four chapters is the problem of divisions in the church. It seems that the members of the church had divided into various cliques based on their adherence to a favorite preacher: Paul (the church founder), Peter (the “Jewish” favorite), Apollos (the “Greek” favorite), or Christ (the “spiritual” choice).

a) *Wisdom (1:10-2:16)*

At the root of this behavior is the Corinthians’ love of Greek wisdom and following different schools of philosophy. Paul contrasts worldly wisdom vs. the foolishness of Christ.

²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (1 Cor. 1:21-25).

In chapter 2, Paul continues to compare human wisdom with heavenly wisdom, and there is no comparison! Paul shows that the eternal, hidden wisdom of God – the gospel of Christ –

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revealed by the Holy Spirit to the apostles and prophets, is superior to the temporary, fallen wisdom of this age.

⁶Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:6-9).

b) Church Leaders (3:1-4:21)

The first four chapters of 1 Corinthians are devoted to dealing with the divisions that were such a threat to the work of the gospel in Corinth. We have seen Paul's tactic for exposing the first of two foundational mistakes that his opponents and detractors were making. They were in danger of rejecting the gospel of the cross in favor of a human wisdom, which seemed so much more successful, attractive, and in particular, Corinthian. Now Paul turns to their second mistake as he begins to show them how they have misunderstood the unique nature of the church and its leadership. The root of the problem is the same. They are adopting the cultural norms of their own situation in Corinth, and seeking to apply those to the church. Once human wisdom and power have displaced the gospel of 'Jesus Christ and Him crucified' in a church setting, then the spotlight will inevitably fall upon the church leaders. If the message is so unimpressive, then the messengers must compensate for it by their wisdom, spirituality, and charisma. As chapter 3 opens, Paul's tactic is to expose the immaturity and worldliness of such a view. In his arguments, he makes use of three different metaphors: serving a spiritual table, planting a spiritual garden, and building a spiritual temple.

In all these metaphors, Paul shows that while God uses human servants to minister to the church, it is God who causes it to grow, mature, and be holy; in addition, he warns us of human servants who minister either ineffectively or destructively.

¹⁰According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

Paul also exposes their pride, which is another source of the divisions in the church.

⁶I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers,[a] that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. ⁷For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? (1 Cor. 4:6-7).

Paul's critique of their pride is hard and biting, but he does it with the intention of admonishing them to imitate him as he imitates Christ. Paul closes this section with a warning: do they want him to come to Corinth with a spirit of gentleness or with a rod? (1 Cor. 4:21).

1 Corinthians – Lesson 18

3. Holiness Code (1 Cor. 5-7)

At chapter 5, the letter begins a new unit that runs through to the end of chapter 7. The unifying theme of these three chapters seems to be the nature of true Christian freedom. Paul uses what seems to have been one of the catch-phrases of the Corinthians, ‘All things are lawful to me’ (6:12); the teaching of these three chapters revolves his qualification of what that should mean in the practice of a godly life, shaped by the gospel of the cross.

a) *Immorality in the Church (1 Cor. 5:1-13)*

Paul deals with a case of sexual immorality in the church that the Corinthians not only did not discipline, but actually tolerated. Paul delivers strict judgment to cleanse the church of immorality, urging them to “purge the evil person from among you” (1 Cor. 5:13).

⁶Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?
⁷Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1 Cor. 5:6-8).

b) *Avoid Lawsuits and Flee Immorality (1 Cor. 6:1-20)*

Apparently, the Corinthians were taking internal church disputes to the secular courts, airing their dirty laundry in public. Paul tells them they should rather accept being defrauded; to go to court is already to lose.

Paul further urges them to flee sexual immorality, which was so prevalent in their culture:

¹²“All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything.... ¹⁸Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. ¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body (1 Cor. 6:12, 18-20).

c) *Questions on Marriage (7:1-40)*

After dealing with a number of problems in the church that had been brought to his attention, Paul now turns to the questions that the Corinthians had written him about. The first questions had to do with marriage and singleness. Paul affirms marriage, but also offers up singleness as a viable life choice for those who have that calling.

⁶Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. ⁷I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. ⁸To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. ⁹But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion (1 Cor. 7:6-9).

4. Meat Sacrificed to Idols (1 Cor. 8:10-11:1)

Paul now turns to another set of questions asked by the Corinthians regarding meat sacrificed to idols.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 18

a) Caring for the Weaker Brother (1 Cor. 8:1-13)

Essentially, “stronger” brothers in Corinth had no problem eating idol-meat, whereas “weaker” brothers did. The stronger Christians were not showing love and concern for their weaker brethren, preferring to exercise their rights at the expense of the consciences of their fellow Christians. While Paul essentially confirms the right theology of the stronger brothers, he admonishes them on their lack of love.

¹¹And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹²Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble (1 Cor. 8:11-13).

b) The Example of Paul (1 Cor. 9:1-27)

Paul now gives the Corinthians a positive example of how to love the weaker brother. Paul was entitled to many privileges as an apostle of Christ, but he willingly gave them up in order not to give anyone any occasion to criticize him for his message. Rather than exert his Christian liberty, he submitted himself to his fellow brethren. He was completely sold out to the gospel of Jesus Christ. He made himself “all things to all people” in order that he might be able to win as many as he could for the gospel.

¹⁹For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. ²²To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

c) The Example of Israel & Summary Arguments (1 Cor. 10:1-11:1)

Paul also gives the Corinthians a negative example; the history of Israel in the wilderness. The Corinthians were tempted by many of the same things that brought judgment and condemnation upon Israel, especially idolatry and immorality.

¹³No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it (1 Cor. 10:13).

Paul wraps up his arguments regarding meat sacrificed to idols by giving a general principle of Christian liberty. Although we have freedom in Christ, our behavior should be guided by the overarching aim to glorify God in all that we do.

³¹So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. ³²Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, ³³just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. ¹Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ (1 Cor. 10:31-11:1).

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.