

Quick Study Commentary Series:

1 Corinthians

Preview

By Chad Sychtysz

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1 Corinthians
By Chad Sychtysz

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Preview

Introduction to 1 Corinthians

Unquestionably, the apostle Paul's epistle to the Corinthians (*1 Corinthians*) is one of the most important and influential books of the New Testament (NT). This epistle is neither a doctrinal treatise (like *Romans*) nor an ordinary letter (like *Philemon*). Rather, it is a testament of Paul's loving patience toward—and forthright admonition of—a mixed group of people who have only recently converted to Christ. Some of these people are Jews, far more are Greeks (Gentiles), but all of them are still learning to live like *Christians*. Paul had to provide encouraging instruction while simultaneously addressing any unchristian behavior. He could not afford to be too hard or too soft; he needed an expert balance, and this letter is proof that he had struck such a balance. Because of this fine contribution to the NT, we have excellent guidance on how to maintain this same balance in our own churches.

The City of Corinth: Corinth [“ornament”] was an important commercial city of ancient Greece, being ideally situated on the western end of the isthmus between the Peloponnesian peninsula and the mainland. It was strategically positioned at the intersection of north–south land trade routes *and* east–west sea trade routes, providing safe passage between the Aegean and Adriatic Seas.



Corinth was on the west side of an isthmus between the Saronic Gulf and the Aegean Sea; Cenchrea was on the eastern side of this isthmus. To avoid sailing around the southern Peloponnesian peninsula, sailors would have their goods carried across this isthmus (about 4.5 miles at its narrowest) on small, wheeled platforms from one city to the other. The idea of digging a canal between the two bodies of water had been around since the time of Julius Caesar. No one completed such a canal, however, until French engineers constructed one in the late 19th century.¹

1 Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 3–4.

Corinth's beginnings date as far back as the seventh century BC. It quickly grew into a prosperous and influential city-state; its trademark Corinthian bronze and ceramics were sold on the international market. Its wealth and power peaked under the rule of Periander (ca. 625–583 BC), but thereafter began to decline under pressure from the Athenians. In the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC), Corinth sided with Athens against Sparta, but the war weakened Corinth and Philip of Macedon (338 BC) overtook it. Philip's son, Alexander the Great, used the city as a commercial center and tourist attraction; after Alexander's death (323 BC), Corinth emerged as the leading city of southern Greece and the Peloponnese. Nonetheless, during the third and fourth centuries BC, it often submitted to Macedonian domination.

In 196 BC, Corinth received limited autonomy by Rome, but it rebelled against Roman rule only fifty years later. As a result of this, Rome thoroughly destroyed the city (146 BC), and it became a sparsely populated ruin for one hundred years. In 46 BC, Julius Caesar declared Corinth a Roman colony, rebuilt the city, and re-populated it with freedmen and poor people who came from every corner of the Mediterranean world. Corinth rapidly regained its prominence, and along with it, unprecedented prosperity. "Its wealth was derived from its commercial traffic by sea and by land, its pottery and brass industries, and its political importance as the capital of Achaia [Greece]. At its height it probably had a population of 200,000 free men and 500,000 slaves."²

While Greece was known for its famous philosophies and philosophers, Corinth was not. "Its boast was trade and the arts. Corinthian brass became famous, and Corinthian capitals and pillars are still known in architecture."³ It was these trades, and the great amount of taxes collected in transporting goods from one side of the isthmus to the other, that made Corinth wealthy and renown. Unfortunately, its paganism, hedonism, and wickedness also flourished; the term "Corinthian" became synonymous with gross immorality in the Mediterranean world. Not only this, but the city was steeped in idolatry and temple prostitution: Apollo, Poseidon, Athena, and

2 A. Rupprecht, "Corinth," *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 1, Merrill. C. Tenney, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1976), 961.

3 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998; © 1937 and 1963 by Augsburg Publishing House), 12.

Aphrodite were among some of the principal gods worshiped there. “There were attached [to the temple of Aphrodite] 1,000 priestesses who were sacred prostitutes, and in the evenings they came down from the Acropolis and plied their trade on the streets of Corinth. . . . Corinth became a synonym not only for wealth, luxury, drunkenness and debauchery, but also for filth.”⁴

Author and Date of Writing: The apostle Paul first visited Corinth on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1ff), circa AD 51 or 52, a visit which followed a poor reception of the gospel in Athens (Acts 17:16ff). Corinth’s coarse reputation and brash immorality were undoubtedly intimidating to Paul. In fact, it seemed an unlikely place for the gospel to succeed, but Jesus told Paul not to be afraid, “for I am with you, . . . and I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:10). As a result of this encouragement, Paul established a church in Corinth and remained there for eighteen months (Acts 18:11). Re-educating the worldly, sensual-minded Corinthians to think and act like Christians was a difficult process; even after all of Paul’s instruction, the Corinthians continued to grapple with their deeply-embedded paganism.⁵ Many of the first-generation converts in the church at Corinth were probably men and women from the lower classes of society (1 Cor. 1:26–31, 6:9–11). Yet, some of the first converts were Jews (Acts 18:8), and these men provided at least some measure of moral and congregational stability.

After he left Corinth, Paul began hearing from trustworthy sources that there were divisions within its church. There was a certain element among the Corinthian believers that had arrogantly concluded that they no longer needed Paul’s instruction, even though they conducted themselves with spiritual immaturity. About this same time, the Corinthians had written to Paul with questions concerning various issues (including marriage, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection). These two situations—the divisions (and those who caused them) and the written questions—were the occasion for the

4 William Barclay, *Letters to the Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975, 2002), 3; bracketed words are mine.

5 After Paul’s epistles to the Corinthians, “The church reemerges into literary history at the close of the first century AD. In about the year 97, Clement of Rome wrote a letter, which survives, to the church. It reveals that the church was still vexed by many of the same problems about which Paul wrote to them” (Rupprecht, “Corinth,” *Zondervan Encyclopedia*, 964).

writing of what we call *1 Corinthians*. (In fact, Paul had already written the Corinthians once before—a letter since lost to history; see 5:9.) There has never been any serious questioning of Paul’s authorship of this letter. Its text raises no major concerns; its canonicity (placement in the sacred writings deemed inspired by God) has never been an issue with early church scholars and historians.⁶ “Even the most radical critics of today will not challenge either the canonicity or authenticity of this book.”⁷

Paul’s earnest intention was to revisit Corinth, but he sent Timothy and Erastus to them first (Acts 19:22, 1 Cor. 16:5–11), and Titus. (Many believe that Titus delivered this first epistle to the Corinthians.) Paul waited anxiously for word from Titus as to how the Corinthians received this letter (2 Cor. 2:12–13), since it dealt with difficult topics and required Paul to make forceful comments. After an agonizing delay, Paul finally learned that the Corinthians (in general) had received his letter in the spirit in which he had written it and had repented of their sins (2 Cor. 7:6–9). There remained, however, a group of “false apostles” who challenged Paul’s apostolic authority (2 Cor. 11:12–13), and Paul’s response to these men occupies much of the epistle we know as *2 Corinthians*. To our knowledge, Paul did not actually visit Corinth again until after the writing of this second epistle.

Paul spent nearly three years in Ephesus (Acts 20:32), and near the end of this period is when it is believed that he wrote *1 Corinthians*. In that letter, he said that he would remain in Ephesus until the coming Pentecost (late spring), and then would make a roundabout trip to Corinth by way of Macedonia (16:5–8). This puts the date of writing no later than the early spring of AD 57, about a year before his arrest in Jerusalem.

Purpose and Theme: In his letter, Paul revealed the Corinthians to be a very worldly-minded people struggling to adapt to a holy, spiritual existence. In all fairness, they still had only a limited exposure to the teaching of the gospel and had come out of deviant lifestyles (6:9–11).⁸ Furthermore,

6 F. F. Bruce, “Corinthians, First Epistle to the,” *Zondervan Encyclopedia*, 972.

7 Mike Willis, *A Commentary on Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Fairmount, IN: Cogdill Foundation, 1979), vii.

8 “The Corinthian church was a carnal church. Many of its members were but recently converted from paganism and found it difficult to separate themselves from their old life. As a result the epistle is largely corrective and exhortatory, rather than doctrinal. Paul severely

they did not have a copy of the NT to reference as we do today. They did, however, have miraculous gifts by which to receive prophecies, confirmation of divine truth, and other needed information. Yet, even with this, they remained “fleshly” in their thinking (3:2–3). They had problems with leadership (or the lack of it), schisms, social/cultural influences, moral issues, church assembly decorum, and doctrinal teachings. Specifically, they:

- ❑ were prone to the petty and divisive spirit that is common among the ungodly (1:10–17).
- ❑ gravitated to the sophisticated oratory style of Greek rhetoricians rather than the simplicity of the gospel of Christ—the “word of the cross” (chapters 1 – 2).
- ❑ tended to put more stock in mere *men* than in Christ (chapter 3). In doing so, they threatened to undermine the work of their own congregation.
- ❑ prided themselves on being independently wise, and therefore no longer in need of Paul’s instruction (chapter 4). Yet, their actions betrayed this, as they continued to think in a way that was spiritually immature and short-sighted.
- ❑ allowed an immoral situation to go unrebuked in their own midst, despite their claim to wisdom and maturity (chapter 5).
- ❑ would rather take their own brothers in Christ to a secular court rather than to allow wise Christian men to decide matters of justice for them (6:1–11).
- ❑ did not see the grave danger of immorality (6:12–20) but assumed that what was done in the body had little bearing upon their spiritual well-being.
- ❑ had several questions about marriage (and celibacy), including the marriage of a believer with an unbeliever (chapter 7).
- ❑ prided themselves on their knowledge of God at the expense of the conscience of their fellow brother in the Lord (chapter 8).
- ❑ misunderstood the use of Christian liberties (chapter 9).
- ❑ thought themselves to be immune to the seduction of pride, the deception of their heart, and the temptation of idolatry (chapter 10).

condemns their carnal practices and childish sectarianism. . . . It is almost completely occupied with Christian conduct and behavior” (M. R. DeHaan, *Studies in First Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1956], 5, 12).

- ❑ misunderstood (and/or had questions on) the role of women in the assembly (11:1–16).
- ❑ turned the Lord’s Supper into a common meal—an event in which they divided over class, economic status, and other worldly distinctions (11:17–34).
- ❑ boasted in their spiritual gifts rather than use them for the encouragement and edification of the church (chapter 12, 14).
- ❑ put more emphasis on temporary gifts than on godly love (chapter 13).
- ❑ allowed outside influences, as well as their own misunderstandings, to undermine the reality and importance of the resurrection of the dead (chapter 15).
- ❑ had questions on “the collection for the saints” (16:1–4).

While Paul’s letter does deal with some issues that are no longer immediately relevant to us (such as the use of miraculous gifts), it provides a wealth of critical instruction to all Christians.

More clearly than any other part of the New Testament, they [i.e., *1 and 2 Corinthians*] show Christianity in conflict with heathenism. We see what method Paul adopted in founding the church in the midst of a refined and corrupt people, and how he answered questions of conscience arising out of the relationships of Christians to the heathen around them. The cases may never occur again, but the principles involved in their decisions serve as lights to the church in all ages. Principles relating to church discipline, social relations, public worship, the nature of the church and of the sacraments are here unfolded not in an abstract form so much as in their application. These letters, therefore, in reference to all practical measures in the establishment of the church among the heathen and to its conduct in Christian lands, are among the most important parts of the Word of God.⁹

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine our understanding of Christ’s church without this information. Not only this, but Christians today continue to grapple with many of the same problems facing the Corinthians: divisions,

⁹ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, electronic edition (database © 2004 by WORDsearch Corp.), “Introduction.”

worldliness, spiritual immaturity, improper use of Christian liberties, the failure to exercise godly love properly, issues dealing with proper conduct and reverence, teachings on the resurrection, etc. “The world refuses to believe our testimony and our message of Christ, because it sees so little of Christ in us. The world forms its estimate of the Lord Jesus only from observing those who claim to be His followers.”¹⁰

It is hard for us to imagine the weight of responsibility placed upon Paul in having to deal with the childlike mentality of the Corinthian church without coming across as angry, patronizing, or condescending. “We perceive the difficulty of the task imposed upon the Apostle, who must guard from so many perils, and guide through so many difficulties, his children in the faith, whom else he had begotten in vain; and we learn to appreciate more fully the magnitude of that laborious responsibility under which he describes himself as almost ready to sink, ‘the care of all the churches.’”¹¹ We can see God’s hand in preparing a man like Paul to deal with a church like the one in Corinth.

¹⁰ DeHaan, *Studies*, 14.

¹¹ W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 380; their citation is from 2 Cor. 11:28.

Salutation and Introductory Comments (1:1–17)

Paul identifies himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God,” immediately re-establishing his role and authority (1:1). This is important and necessary, since some Corinthians thought they were as knowledgeable or capable as he was, and therefore no longer needed his instruction. Paul reminds them that God “called” him to be an apostle rather than him assuming this office on his own authority (Acts 9:15–16, 26:16–18, and Col. 1:25).

Concerning “Sosthenes,” nothing else is known about him unless he is the same man mentioned in Acts 18:17. “However, against this identification is the fact that Sosthenes was a rather common name and there is no evidence linking the two.”¹² While Sosthenes gives his endorsement to this letter, Paul remains its true author and wields his own apostolic authority throughout it. It is also possible that Paul dictated this epistle to Sosthenes to write it; regardless, Paul authenticates this with his characteristic signature (16:21).

Recognition of the Corinthian Church (1:2–9): The “church of God which is at Corinth” (1:2) identifies a singular, self-governed *earthly* congregation and not the entire *spiritual* body of Christ (compare Col. 1:18, for example). Christ’s church is comprised of spiritual souls; the church at Corinth is comprised of physical people. The two (Christ’s church and the church at Corinth) are not interchangeable, are not in the same context, and do not operate in the exact same way. Christ is the “head” of His church by virtue of His identity (as its Redeemer) and His authority (as the Son of God). Whether He serves as the “head” of the church at Corinth is determined by the faithfulness of those who comprise that congregation. Christ’s fellowship (1:9) is not automatic or assumed; it can only be present when people agree to the terms of that fellowship. The synonymous phrases Paul uses to describe the congregation is as follows:

- **“the church of God which is at Corinth”:** While “church of Christ” is used only once in Scripture to identify a congregation of believers (Rom.

¹² Willis, *Commentary*, 5.

16:16), “church of God” is used numerous times: Acts 20:28, 1 Cor. 10:32, 11:16, 22, 2 Cor. 1:1, etc.

- ❑ **“those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus”:** The collection of Christians at Corinth could not be legitimately recognized by Christ’s apostle unless they *belonged* to Christ.
- ❑ **“saints by calling”:** “Saints” literally means “holy ones,” which describes not only the (ideally) virtuous nature of such people (1 Peter 1:13–16, Rev. 19:8) but also their access to the Father through Christ (Eph. 2:17–19).¹³ “Holiness is more than a state. For believers, sanctification is both a definitive act of God and a lifelong process.”¹⁴
- ❑ **“those who ... call upon ... Christ”:** To “call upon the name of the Lord” means to appeal to Christ for the salvation that He offers (Acts 4:12). God calls people through His gospel (2 Thess. 2:14), but one must make a proper *response* to the gospel.

Jim McGuiggan says at this point, “If we didn’t read the rest of the book we’d come away believing that the Corinthian church must have been utterly spotless, a shining example of godly living to all the people of God with whom they have been identified in this marvelous opening. But having read it, we might be led to wonder how Paul could so speak of them.”¹⁵ Thankfully, fellowship with God is not dependent upon flawless human performance. At the same time, to *continue* in His fellowship requires continued faithfulness.

Paul prayed often for the Corinthians (1:4). He reminds them that “in everything you were enriched in Him [Christ]” (1:5),” since “in Christ” is the source of all spiritual blessings (Eph. 1:3). Such blessings (“gifts”) come through His word (2 Tim. 3:16–17), the personal example of Christ (John 13:17), and however God chooses to answer prayers (James 1:5). “Gifts of grace are a valuable, and indeed indispensable, accompaniment of Christian life, which without them would fail to bear witness to its supernatural origin.

13 James Strong, *Strong’s Talking Greek–Hebrew Dictionary*, electronic edition (© WORDsearch Corp., no date), G40.

14 Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 35.

15 Jim McGuiggan, *The Book of 1 Corinthians* (Lubbock, TX: Montex Publishing Co., 1984), 18.

They are not, however, the end of Christian life, in which men ‘await the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.’”¹⁶

“[T]he revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:7) points to a future event and has no reference in the NT epistles other than the Second Coming of Christ (Phil. 3:20, Col. 3:4, 1 Thess. 1:10, 2:19, 1 Peter 1:7, etc.). Paul consistently regarded Christ’s second advent as a real and literal event that will signal the end of the physical world (1 Thess. 4:13–17, 2 Peter 3:3–10).

Thus, the same God who calls into fellowship those who are saved by the grace of Christ will see their salvation to its end (1:8–9; see Phil. 1:6).¹⁷ “God is faithful” means He is believable, trustworthy, and dependable; He unfailingly delivers on His promises. He is faithful to Himself, His word, His promises, individual believers, and (collectively) His church.

Divisions in the Church (1:10–17): To “agree [or, speak the same thing]” (1:10) does *not* mean that human consensus is to govern the church at Corinth. The source of all Christian agreement must conform to the doctrine that defines fellowship with God *and* each other. This unity must also be consistent with Christ’s own oneness or like-mindedness with His Father (John 17:17–23). It is impossible for people to have unity with God apart from His doctrine, which His Son has revealed to us (Gal. 1:11–12). Divisions (schisms; sects; factions) within a church are *always* the result of some or all its members failing to “preserve the unity of the Spirit” (Eph. 4:3) in their teaching as well as their personal conduct toward one another. Thus, maintaining the “same mind” and “same judgment [or, opinion; sentiment¹⁸]” has a specific reference, and does not apply to *all* contexts.

16 C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publ., 1996), 38.

17 Fellowship—with God and His people—is the result of the combined work of divine grace and human faith (Eph. 2:8–9). These two works are not comparable in power or scope but are both necessary. We have fellowship with one another only when we all have fellowship with God (1 John 1:1–3). This fellowship makes us all equals before God: we are “fellow heirs,” “fellow members” of Christ’s church (body), and “fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph. 3:6). Those who remain outside of Christ also remain outside of this spiritual fellowship; those who are in Christ and continue to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which [they] have been called” (Eph. 4:1) are brothers and sisters in the Lord and “sons and daughters” to God (2 Cor. 6:18).

18 A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, no date), 72.

When we follow Christ's example (John 13:13–17, 35–36) and doctrine (John 8:31–32), we will unify as those who identify with Him.

Fellowship, unity, one-mindedness, and singularity of purpose are the ideals. However, the Corinthians manifested spiritual immaturity through their quarrels and schisms (1:11).¹⁹ We do not know who “Chloe’s people” are—though the Corinthians did—but it seems clear that the apostle learned about the divisions among the Corinthians *not* through the letter they wrote to him (see 7:1) but a third party.²⁰ Specifically, the Corinthians were dividing themselves by the men who baptized them (1:12). Thus, individual members placed greater emphasis on human distinctions rather than give all glory to Christ (see 1:30–31). “Apollos” is undoubtedly the man of the same name in Acts 18:24–28; being a skilled orator, he would have had a certain appeal to the Greeks in Corinth who put great confidence in the ability to speak eloquently and proficiently. “Cephas” is the Hebrew name for Simon Peter (John 1:42) and would have found a ready audience among the Jews in the Corinthian church. Still others chose Paul as their champion. And (lastly, to emphasize Paul’s point), some even chose to identify with Christ Himself (!). “Strange to say, men still invent Christs to suit their own religious whims.”²¹

19 Paul twice uses the word “brethren” in this passage (1:10–11). “By the very use of the word, Paul does two things. First, he softens the rebuke which is given, not in any threatening way, but as from one who has no other emotion than love. Second, it should have shown them how wrong their dissensions and divisions were. They were fellow Christians, and they should have lived in mutual love” (Theodore Beza, quoted in Barclay, *Letters*, 17).

20 Based upon the name, and its association with the Greek goddess Demeter, J. B. Lightfoot thinks that “Chloe” is probably a former slave that has been freed. “Slaves and by consequence freedmen seem very frequently to have born the Greek names of heathen divinities” (*Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995], 152). Kistemaker says: “We would expect that she resided in Corinth, for the text implies that the Corinthians knew her. Also, the news concerning the factions originated there. Another possibility is that Chloe was a businesswoman who lived in Ephesus and that her employees (either slaves, freedmen, or members of her family) regularly traveled between Corinth and Ephesus and were fully acquainted with the church. Whether Chloe was a Christian cannot be determined” (*1 Corinthians*, 45).

21 Lenski, *Interpretation*, 45.