

1 Corinthians

Personal Workbook

Preview

Chad Sychtysz



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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 a rich example 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 needed an expert balance of both encouragement and correction, 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 European 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.¹



Corinth’s beginnings date as far back as the seventh century BC. During the third and fourth centuries BC, it remained under Macedonian control. In 196 BC, the city 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, it rapidly regained its prominence as well as unprecedented prosperity.² Unfortunately, its paganism, hedonism, and wickedness also flourished; the term “Corinthian” became synonymous with gross immorality in the Mediterranean world. The city was also steeped in idolatry and temple prostitution: Apollo, Poseidon, Athena, and Aphrodite were among some of the principal gods worshiped there.³

Author and Date of Writing: There has never been any serious questioning of Paul's authorship of this letter.⁴ Its text raises no major concerns; its canonicity (or, placement in the sacred writings deemed inspired by God) has never been an issue with early church scholars and historians.⁵ The apostle Paul first visited Corinth on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1ff) in AD 51 or 52. 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).

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 writing of what we call *1 Corinthians*.

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 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 him to use strong language at times. 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. 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 imbedded paganism.⁶ These people still had only a limited exposure to the teaching of the gospel, and some had come out of deviant lifestyles (6:9–11).⁷ Furthermore, 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 unreprimanded 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).
- ❑ 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. 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, 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.

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.'⁸ We can see God's hand in preparing a man like Paul to deal with a church like the one in Corinth.

Preview

Lesson One:

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.”⁹ 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 (Col. 1:18). 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. 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,”¹⁰ 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).
- ❑ **“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).

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).

“[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 saved by Christ’s grace will see their salvation to its end (1:8–9; see Phil. 1:6). “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). Thus, maintaining the “same mind” and “same judgment [or, opinion; sentiment¹¹]” has a specific reference and context.

Fellowship, unity, one-mindedness, and singularity of purpose are the ideals. However, the Corinthians manifested spiritual immaturity through their quarrels and schisms (1:11).¹² We do not know who “Chloe’s people” are, but it seems clear that the apostle learned about the divisions among the Corinthians through a third party.¹³ 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 some even chose to identify with Christ (!).

“Has Christ been divided?” (1:13)—we can almost hear the sadness and exasperation in Paul’s voice.¹⁴ The problem was not in their baptism but in ascribing the importance of their identity to mere men rather than to Christ. In other words, the Corinthians were baptized *rightly* but began distinguishing or identifying themselves *wrongly*. Since *Christ* has not been divided, the *church of Corinth* had no right to be divided—especially over that which was supposed to unite them! In dividing into schisms or party names (i.e., denominations), they succumbed to a worldly mentality. It is *Christ* who gives their baptism meaning, not Paul, Apollos, or Cephas (Peter); they were baptized in the name of *Christ*, not anyone else (Acts 2:38).

In light of the Corinthians’ divisions based upon who baptized them—and this is a critical point of the apostle’s response—Paul is glad that he only baptized a handful of people (1:14–17).¹⁵ (“Crispus” is undoubtedly the leader of the synagogue in Corinth [Acts 18:8]; “Gaius,” a common name,

may be the one mentioned in Rom. 16:23.) His statement, “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (1:17), is hardly meant to nullify the need for baptism in the context of salvation.¹⁶ Baptism (immersion) in water is essential for salvation (“baptism now saves you”—1 Peter 3:21); it is impossible to be “clothed with Christ” (Gal. 3:27) or united with Christ (Rom. 6:3–4) otherwise. And yet, while many different men could baptize believers in water, few could reveal divine doctrine with apostolic authority. Thus, the apostle Paul gave personal priority to preaching the gospel over immersing people in water.¹⁷ “Paul is by no means discrediting baptism. . . . [but] had to use all his time and talent to preach the Word and hence left the matter of baptism primarily to others.”¹⁸

By exalting themselves according to petty divisions over men, the Corinthians were in danger of making the cross of Christ “void” or useless (1:17). They were willing to honor men at Christ’s expense—something Paul would never do.

Questions

- 1.) Is “church of God” (1:1) as acceptable as “church of Christ” for designating a congregation of God’s saints (1:2)? Are these formal names required by divine decree or merely *descriptors* that we can use interchangeably?

- 2.) For all the corrections and admonitions in this letter, Paul still begins by calling them “saints” (1:2) and refers to them throughout this letter as “brethren” (20 times). What does this tell us concerning:
 - a. Believers who are *ignorant* and *mistaken* yet still striving to serve Christ as Lord? (Does Christ still regard these people as Christians?)
 - b. Paul’s expectations of those who are ignorant and mistaken? (Is he content to let them remain in this condition?)
 - c. Our own fellowship with such people? (If Paul recognized *his* fellowship with such people, then how should *we* regard them?)

- 3.) Does being of the “same mind” (1:10) require that *all* members of a given congregation agree on *every* issue, biblical topic, or spiritual subject? Or are there *some* topics that we *must* agree on, while others do not require unanimous agreement—and if so, *how do we know* which is which?

- 4.) What do you suppose prompted the Corinthians to call themselves after mere men rather than to identify only with Christ (1:11–12)? How might this same spirit of division still manifest itself within the brotherhood today? Please explain.

Lesson Two:

The Paradoxical Word of the Cross (1:18–31)

The “Foolishness” of the Gospel (1:18–25): The “word of the cross” (1:18) is synonymous with the gospel of Christ. This “word” includes not only the crucifixion but everything necessary to lead up to that event, all the implications of it, and everything gained by it. Christians everywhere ought to give their full attention to Christ and all that He accomplished on the cross. This message is central to God’s plan of redemption and fulfills His “eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:11).

Despite this, the unconverted world simply regards Jesus as another starry-eyed revolutionary who died as a pitiful martyr. Some people think that Jesus failed to be who He said He was and do what He promised to do. To the world, the message of a crucified Savior is pure nonsense. The pathetic, bloodied image of Jesus on a cross appears “foolish” in the sight of those who only see what they want to see and do not consider all the facts. Paul refers to such people as “perishing,” which refers to their spiritual condition (2 Cor. 4:3–4, 2 Thess. 2:10, and 2 Peter 3:9). Jesus came to save people *from* perishing (John 3:16), yet every person who rejects Him remains “dead” in their sins (Eph. 2:1–3).

Paul describes a world of doomed people who do not *know* they are doomed—those who sneer at the idea of being “saved” when they are oblivious to the fact that they are *lost*. Thus, they fail to see the reality of their own hopeless condition even as they mock the One who came to rescue them *from* it. In contrast, the “word of the cross” has enlightened those “who are being saved [or, are saved]” (1:18b) as to their true condition and have responded in faith to the demands *of* that message. To these (Christians), Jesus’ work on the cross was not a sign of weakness or foolishness but incomprehensible strength and transcendent wisdom. It takes nothing less than divine power to overcome death and everything the world threw at Him (Phil. 2:5–11).