

ANDREW WILSON 1 CORINTHIANS FOR YOU

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1 Corinthians For You

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *1 Corinthians For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **grey** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translations used:

- NIV: New International Version, 2011 edition (this is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated)
- ESV: English Standard Version
- NKJV: New King James Version

INTRODUCTION TO 1 CORINTHIANS

When asked for their favourite Pauline letter, most people take Romans or Ephesians to the ball. My heart will always be with Corinth.

The breadth and scope of 1 Corinthians are breathtaking. It is the most wide-ranging and complete letter Paul wrote; readers who are used to Paul taking several chapters of careful argument to make one or two points—like *Gentiles* and Jews should eat together* (Galatians) or even *thanks for the gift* (Philippians)—will be amazed at the sheer variety of subjects that Paul tackles and the punchy clarity with which he speaks.

My affection for this letter is inspired by several aspects of it. Partly it is because it summarises the central themes of the Christian faith so crisply and beautifully. The cross: “We preach Christ crucified” (1:23). Grace: “What do you have that you did not receive?” (4:7). God: “There is one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ” (8:6). Mission: “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (9:22). Love: “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (13:13, ESV). The gospel: “... that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (15:3-4, ESV). Hope: “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (15:26). It is a pithy, profound and quotable epistle.

Partly it is because I love corporate worship. Without 1 Corinthians it would be hard to imagine how church services actually worked in the New Testament. We would know next to nothing about the Lord’s Supper in these first-generation churches. We would have no idea how **spiritual gifts** are supposed to function in Christian worship. Thanks to the chaos in Corinth and Paul’s response to it, we have plenty of guidance on both counts.

* Words in **grey** are defined in the Glossary (page 195).

Partly it is because I am a pastor in a large, cosmopolitan and very diverse city. The people in my community, like the people in Corinth, worship lots of different gods and have sex with lots of different people. This letter helps me think through how to help them, with specifics on practical application—sexuality, idolatry, food, divorce, remarriage,

It is vital that we think and talk about grace, but sometimes we just need to see grace.

singleness, adultery, church discipline and even incest—that I would not find anywhere else.

And partly it is because the Corinthians were a mess, and God loved them anyway. It is vital that we think about **grace**, and talk about grace, but sometimes we just need to see grace. Sometimes we need to watch an exasperated **apostle** talking to a rebellious and

divisive church with tenderness and affection and with a faith that believes in the transformation that can only come from the power of the Spirit, the example of Christ and the faithfulness of God. That's what this letter puts so richly on display. It brings hope to "Corinthians" everywhere, including me.

Welcome to Corinth

Roman Corinth was a large, bustling, commercial and pluralistic city in southern Greece. It was the regional capital of Achaia, known among other things for its port on the Peloponnesian isthmus, its sexual promiscuity, and its hosting of the biennial Isthmian Games. Originally a Greek city, it had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC and then rebuilt by Julius Caesar a hundred years later. We cannot be sure how large it was in Paul's day—I have seen figures ranging from a population of 20,000 to 800,000!—but an estimate of between 40,000 and 60,000 is probably about right (see Rinse Willet, "Whirlwind of

Numbers: Demographic Experiments for Roman Corinth” in *Ancient Society* 42 (2012), pages 127-158).

Paul had founded the church on his second missionary journey, spending a year and a half there after hearing in a dream that God had many people in the city (Acts 18:1-11). This letter was written a few years later, in the spring of AD 54 or 55, in response to receiving a worrying letter (see 1 Corinthians 7:1) and some even more worrying news (1:11) from the members of the church. As with the city, it is hard to be sure how large the church was. It cannot have been much fewer than 50, given all the names and households Paul mentions. But it is unlikely to have been more than 200 because the whole church met together in one place, whether in Gaius’s house (Romans 16:23) or another venue like a restaurant or barn (see Edward Adams, *The Earliest Christian Meeting Places: Almost Exclusively Houses?*). If we imagine a church of 100 in a city of 50,000, we will not be too far out. It might encourage us to realise how similar those numbers are to the situation of many churches today—and it might also help us understand how outnumbered the Christians were and what implications that had for the life of the church.

We need to understand this because the most striking thing about the Corinthian church was not its size or its demographic makeup, but the degree to which worldly ideas and practices were accepted in the congregation. It is as if the boundaries between the church and the world had almost disappeared. Some New Testament churches struggled with opposition and persecution from the cities around them. The Corinthians faced the opposite problem: assimilation into a pagan, promiscuous, competitive and idolatrous culture. Much of Paul’s effort in writing this letter—whether it relates to leadership, sexuality, the nature of the church, idol food, corporate worship or the resurrection—aims to re-establish the differences between the church and the city, and between Christianity and idolatry. That is one of many reasons why it is such a helpful text for those of us who live in the **post-Christian** West.

Structurally, the letter is very simple. There are five major sections of material, bookended by a short introduction and thanksgiving and a concluding chapter of instructions, travel plans and greetings:

Introduction and thanksgiving (1:1-9)

- I. Divisions and the cross (1:10 – 4:21)
- II. Flee sexual immorality (5:1 – 7:40)
- III. Flee idolatry (8:1 – 11:1)
- IV. Corporate worship (11:2 – 14:40)
- V. The resurrection of the body (15:1-58)

Concluding instructions, travel plans and greetings (16:1-24)

We'll work through these sections, pretty much verse by verse, sometimes using the second part of a chapter to pause and consider in more detail a major theme of that passage.

Let's start.

1. A SURPRISING START

If you or I had written 1 Corinthians, it would have been a lot shorter.

The church at Corinth was in a terrible mess. We will find that out very quickly. This letter gives a host of examples: squabbling, incest, sleeping with prostitutes, idolatry, drunkenness during **Communion**, chaotic worship services, denying the future resurrection, and who knows what else. If I was writing to them, I wouldn't have had the patience for sixteen chapters of careful argument and pastoral wisdom. I would have sent a single paragraph, a theological drone strike with the sole aim of blowing their appalling behaviour off the face of the earth:

Andrew, called to be an apostle by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God in Corinth: Stop. Now. Repent, apologise, change your ways, and I might find it in my heart to talk to you again next winter. Grace be with you. Amen.

Paul does something very different, and it tells us a lot. The length of the letter and the **rhetorical** care with which it is written reveal how much Paul loves the Corinthians and wants to win them over. The depth of **theological** argument, even when addressing things that you would think are obvious (like “Christians shouldn't have sex with prostitutes”), highlights his desire for believers not just to change their actions but to understand why they should do so. His tender language displays his affection for them. The way he sandwiches his **ethical** teaching between sections on the cross (chapter 1) and the resurrection (chapter 15) shows that for Paul, the gospel really is the beginning and the end of the Christian life.

But it is this opening paragraph in **1:1-9*** that provides the sharpest contrast between the way I would have written this letter, venting and blustering my way through an angry rant, and the way Paul did. (Sosthenes is mentioned as well in **verse 1**, but he is probably a **scribe** or secretary rather than a co-author, so from now on I will refer to the author as Paul.) A few things leap off the page as we consider the first nine verses.

One is how Jesus-centred they are. The passage almost sounds jarring. Jesus Christ is mentioned by name nine times in nine verses: as the one who called Paul to be an apostle (**v 1**), the one in whom the Corinthians have been made holy and upon whose name they call (**v 2**), the giver of grace (**v 3**) and the one in whom that grace has been given (**v 4**). Jesus is the source of all riches (**v 5**), the subject of Paul's preaching (**v 6**) and the basis for Christian hope (**v 7**). The whole of history is pointing forward to the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (**v 8**), when he shall return as Judge and King. Yet this same Jesus is the one with whom we have fellowship—communion, life-in-common—in the meantime: "Jesus Christ our Lord" (**v 9**). To Paul, Jesus is everything.

As a result, Paul is deeply grateful for the church in spite of all that he knows about them. Partly this stems from God's call, which (as for every church) is a call to be "holy people" (**v 2**—or "saints", ESV). Partly it flows from his experience of the power of God's grace, which has transformed their lives and thereby backed up the truthfulness of Paul's message, "confirming our testimony about Christ among you" (**v 6**). It is also a result of the spiritual gifts that God has poured out on the church (**v 7**), enriching them in every way and particularly with all speech and knowledge (**v 5**). These gifts have not been handled wisely, and Paul will return to this later. But for now, the fact that God has given so many gifts (*charismata*) to the church is a reason for thankfulness.

Most strikingly, Paul displays an astonishing level of confidence in the Corinthians' future. "He will also keep you firm to the end, so

* All 1 Corinthians verse references being looked at in each chapter part are in **bold**.

that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v 8). Firm to the end? Blameless? I can think of New Testament churches to whom I could have written that—the Philippians or the Thessalonians perhaps, but not the Corinthians! Yet Paul is certain. They will be confirmed to the end. They will be irreproachable on the day of judgment. And his basis for saying so is not the moral performance of the church on earth but the absolute faithfulness of God in heaven. God’s commitment to his people is the guarantee that the Corinthians will make it, in spite of all the sin that characterises them at the moment (and all the warnings Paul will issue later). The same is true of believers today. “God is faithful” (v 9).

An Appeal for Unity

How do you identify the main point of a letter? It is easy with emails because there is a “subject” line at the top. It is easy with texts and WhatsApp messages because they are so short. But it can be harder in other forms of communication, especially when there is a significant cultural distance between the writer/speaker and the reader/hearer.

When my wife, Rachel, was learning how to teach English as a foreign language, she had to learn how to teach someone the basics of a business phone call in English. In many cultures, she discovered, business people state their reason for phoning straight away, as we might in an email. But English people don’t speak to people on the phone like that. What they do, explained the teacher, is both very predictable and very odd. They greet one another and talk about nothing of any real importance for up to thirty seconds. Then there will be a pause for about a second, at which point the caller will say either “So...” or “Anyway...” or “The reason I’m calling is...” Only then do you find out what the conversation is actually going to be about. (Think about it: if you’re English, I bet you’ll discover it’s true of you.) Rachel finished the lesson quite baffled—not because this formula wasn’t accurate but because it was completely accurate and she had never noticed.

In Paul's world, letters followed a fairly set pattern, much like phone calls do in ours, and you can see it in this chapter. You would identify yourself (v 1) and then the people to whom you were writing (v 2), greeting them with peace (v 3; Paul, as obsessed with the kindness of God as always, adds "grace"). Usually you would give thanks for the other person, whether for their health, their letter, their friendship, or something else (v 4-9). With those introductory elements out the way, you would then turn to the reason for your letter. In the case of 1 Corinthians, it is this: "that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought" (v 10).

In light of all the issues that will crop up later, unity might not seem like the obvious priority. It might seem as if Paul is easing into the letter, beginning with the low-hanging fruit before turning to genuinely controversial matters. But when you consider the major problems in the church, you notice that almost all of them are characterised by a combination of pride and division. There is pride and division over leaders (chapters 1 – 4), sexual ethics (chapters 5 – 6), litigation (chapter 6), marriage (chapter 7), idol food (chapters 8 – 10), corporate worship (chapter 11), spiritual gifts (chapters 12 – 14) and even the resurrection (chapter 15). Taken in isolation, each issue could be tackled on its own merits. But Paul is a wise pastor. He can see the common thread—division—running through all the problems. So he addresses it up front and gets to the specifics later.

There are quarrels in the church, which Paul knows about because people from Chloe's household have told him (1:11). There are factions in the community, each identifying with a different leader: Paul, **Apollos**, Peter (called here by his Aramaic name, Cephas) and Christ (v 12). We will never know exactly why the various groups took these different names. I like to think of them as the Spiritual, the Sophisticated, the Serious and the Smug—we clearly have some who regard themselves as more spiritual than everyone else (chapters 2 – 3, 12 – 14), some who love eloquent worldly wisdom and "know" that idols don't really exist (chapters 1, 8 – 10), some who are much more cautious about both of

these and would be regarded as “weak” by either or both of the others, and a final group of which all we know is their slogan: “I follow Christ”. But my guess is no more likely than anyone else’s.

What we do know is that each of these four men would have been appalled to see their names used in such a way. Paul is horrified by it and quickly marshals a flurry of arguments to expose how destructive it is (**1:13**). *Christ is not divided, is he?* says Paul, *so how can the church be? Paul wasn’t crucified for you, was he, so how can you possibly put his name alongside that of Jesus? You weren’t baptised into the name of Paul, were you? So why would you put loyalty to me ahead of loyalty to the body of Christ?* Paul is responding so quickly that he forgets how many people he has baptised and has to correct himself (**v 14-16**). But he makes this point because he wants to remind the Corinthians that their ultimate allegiance is to Jesus rather than to him. Baptism was never Paul’s primary mission. His primary mission was to preach the gospel of the cross of Christ, in which all human self-importance comes to nothing (**v 17**).

Three Types of Foolishness

The primary problem in the church, and Paul’s main reason for writing this letter in the first place, is division (**v 10**). But we divide because of pride; the root of factionalism is almost always self-importance and arrogance. So before engaging with the factions and leaders in more detail in chapters 3 and 4, Paul looks first to cut the legs out from underneath worldly divisions by skewering human pride. He does this by drawing a series of contrasts—wise/foolish, strong/weak, influential/lowly—and showing how the gospel puts us on the “wrong” side of all of them. In our preaching, our message and our very existence we are foolish, weak and lowly. So if we are going to blow our trumpets about anything, it had better not be ourselves or any human leaders. Rather, “let the one who boasts boast in the Lord” (**1:31**).


Christian preaching is fundamentally foolish, at least in the eyes of the world. The world, in Paul’s day, had all sorts of wonderful

techniques to make its messages more acceptable: wisdom, eloquence, intelligence, legal reasoning, philosophy (v 17-20). Our generation has added the power of advertising, popular music, newspapers, movies, websites and television shows which push a particular vision of the true, the good or the beautiful, and by presenting it well make it seem more plausible. Meanwhile the church is stuck with a method that looked foolish in ancient Corinth and looks even more foolish now: preaching. Not with tricks or stunts. Not with high-budget special effects or virtual-reality immersive experiences. Not with wisdom or eloquence, “lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (v 17). Just proclaiming what God has done in Christ and trusting that God will use that message to turn people’s lives the right way up.

Hopefully this is obvious, but this is not an argument for long, dull, rambling, monotone, unimaginative sermons. I have sat through a few of those, and they have nothing to do with Paul’s point here. In this very letter, Paul proves himself a master of punchy, witty, direct, well-illustrated, concise, rhetorical, funny and incisive communication (and I spend a good deal of my time trying to communicate like that myself). Instead, it is an argument for recognising where the power to save really comes from: not from the polish, the pranks or the presentation but from the proclamation of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. As a recruitment strategy in a visually saturated world, it is foolishness. Yet that was how God saved the Corinthians and how he has saved everybody since: “God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (v 21). The Corinthian church, in which each member’s testimony was that they were saved simply by hearing the message of Christ crucified, was living proof that it works.

It is not just the method that is foolish, though; the message is foolish as well. “Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (v 22-23). Jewish people, as we know from the four Gospels, were eager for “signs” that would accompany and authorise the **Messiah**, just like many today look for religious

experiences (for instance, Matthew 12:38; 16:1; John 2:18; 4:48). Greek people prized *sophia*, “wisdom”, in the same way that modern people might prize reason or science. In that world, Paul says, our message is preposterous: a crucified Messiah looks like a complete contradiction to Jews and utter lunacy to everyone else. Yet when this crazy message is heard by people whom God has called, whether they are Jews or Gentiles, it turns out to be both God’s power and his wisdom (1 Corinthians **1:24**). The most apparently ridiculous thing that God has ever done is, it turns out, far smarter than the cleverest thing that human beings have ever come up with (**v 25**).



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Messiah
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Having shown the foolishness of Christian preaching and the Christian message, Paul moves to his masterful punchline: the Corinthian church’s very existence is foolish. *Look at yourselves*, he says. *When you became believers, you weren’t a high-powered, rich, upmarket group of movers and shakers (v 26). But God saved you anyway. He took hold of the weak, the shameful, the vulnerable, the poor and the poorly educated, and turned them—you!—into demonstrations of his transforming favour.* (The Corinthian church, like most revivals in church history, was mainly drawn from among the poor.) *The fact that this church exists at all is proof that God chooses foolish things over wise things, so that nobody might boast before him (v 27-29). You are not wise, righteous, holy and redeemed because of your backgrounds*, Paul points out to them, *but because you are “in Christ Jesus” (v 30). You were foolish people who heard a foolish message preached in a foolish way—and God has demonstrated his wisdom in you so powerfully that the smartest people on earth are left scratching their heads and wondering how he did it. So if you’re going to boast about anything, you should boast in the Lord (v 31).*

Questions for reflection

1. Which are you more aware of in your church: the flaws that need correction or the evidences of God's grace? How does Paul's introduction help you with this?
2. What secondary issues or individual loyalties make you most tempted to divide from other Christians?
3. In what ways do people today regard Christianity as foolish? How is this different from the way it was regarded in Paul's day? Why?