

1 CORINTHIANS

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# THE CHURCH IN THE CITY



9 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR  
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



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SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

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 **matthiasmedia**  
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

*The Church in the City*

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Matthias Media

(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)

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ISBN 978 1 925424 92 8

Cover design and typesetting by Lankshear Design.

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## » HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

### 1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God’s word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of ‘interaction’—interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

## **2. The format**

The studies contain five main components:

- sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- numbered questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- ‘Implications’ sections that help you think about what the passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

## **3. How to use these studies on your own**

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but also respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learned.

## **4. How to use these studies in a small group**

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don’t need the formal structure of a ‘group’ to gain maximum benefit.

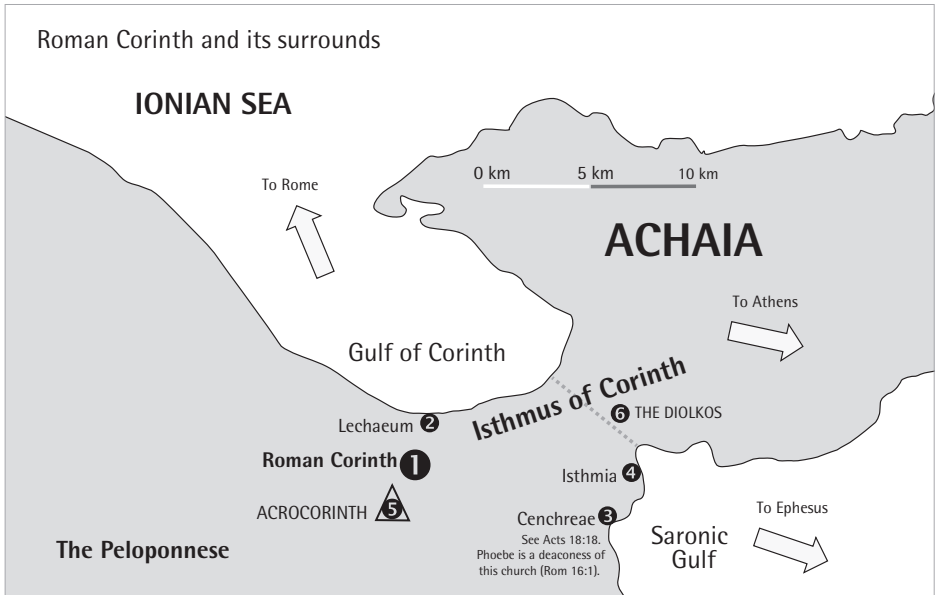
- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining the sections of text to emphasize and read out loud, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- If your group members usually don't work through the study in advance, it's extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the 'Implications' to focus on.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

## 5. Bible translation

We quote from and refer to the English Standard Version, which we recommend. There should not generally be any problems, however, if you are using a different translation (though it might be useful to have an ESV on hand in case of any confusion).



## The city of Corinth in the first century AD



ROMAN CORINTH ① WAS LOCATED on the six-kilometre-wide land bridge (isthmus) that joins the Peloponnese in the south to mainland Greece in the north. Uniquely, Corinth was served by the port of Cenchreae ③ in the east on the Aegean Sea (convenient for travel to modern-day Turkey and beyond) and by the port of Lechaëum ② to the west on the Ionian Sea (accessing the Adriatic Sea and Italy). Traders preferred to transfer their cargo overland across the isthmus by the pathway known as 'The Diolkos' ⑥, avoiding the open sea around the Peloponnese (a canal serves this purpose today). This made Corinth a wealthy commercial, cultural and sporting centre. It hosted the Isthmian Games ④ every two years (second in importance only to the Olympics), and

was also of strategic military significance.

Corinth had been re-founded as a Roman colony by Julius Caesar in 44 BC. During Paul's time, its population spoke Greek and Latin and included mainly Roman colonists, both freedmen and veterans, although it undoubtedly attracted Greek settlers and foreign immigrants. Around a third of its population were slaves. The Jewish community had been significantly bolstered as a result of Emperor Claudius evicting the Jews from Rome in AD 49 (cf. Acts 18:1-17). The city was filled with Graeco-Roman temples, cults and idols. On the summit of the 'Acrocorinth' ⑤—a 600-metre-high limestone mountain—stood the temple of Aphrodite (Greek)/Venus (Roman), goddess of love, passion, and procreation.

## » STUDY 1

# THE GOSPEL OF THE CRUCIFIED CHRIST

[1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-2:16]

### Entertainment culture

WHAT DOES 'SUCCESSFUL' CHURCH look like in Western societies today? Comfortable air-conditioned buildings; million-dollar light shows and smoke machines; multimedia presentations based on modern theatre; extended soft-rock performances; music that builds crowd excitement and euphoria; young, attractive, talented performers fashionably dressed and immaculately styled; dynamic preaching that borrows from stand-up comedy and motivational speaking; franchise arrangements with satellite campuses that beam the mother-church experience to less fortunate districts; personalities to see and be seen with; interns and apprentices to usher, mind, and clean; training schemes to propagate the vision; a carefully cultivated brand; book deals,

podcasts, and TV appearances.

What does all this communicate? Prosperity, beauty, fashion, excitement, wealth, power, sophistication, relevance. We, and the God we worship, are impressive, successful, and attractive—not some dusty, boring, antiquated oddity or some struggling tin-pot operation. We exude success. We hide any difficulty and suffering, and we display triumph and 'blessing'. We must show that we are 'glorious'.

All this appeals to our aspirational consumer culture, which yearns for success and entertainment, relief from boredom and pain, distraction, stimulation of the senses, and comfort.

But while it might appeal to worldly wisdom, God is not found there.

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## The apostle Paul

Also known as Saul of Tarsus, Paul was a Jewish Rabbi. As a young man, he was violently opposed to the message that Jesus was the Christ (Acts 7:58-8:3). But on one of his persecution journeys, the risen Jesus appeared to him and appointed him to preach the gospel to the nations (Acts 9:1-31, 22:1-21, 26:1-23; Phil 3:4-11; 1 Tim 1:12-17). By the time he wrote 1 Corinthians, Paul had announced the gospel throughout Syria, Arabia, Judea, Cyprus and modern-day Turkey and Greece. He had also written the letter to the Galatians and the two Thessalonian letters. As the apostle to the Gentiles, he partnered with other Christians, led missionary teams, and planted churches in new places.

## The Sophists

The Sophists (whose name was derived from the Greek word for 'wisdom', *sophia*) were a class of professional speakers, teachers, debaters, entertainers and advocates. Their impressive oratory, education and wit garnered them popularity and acclaim, attracted disciples, gave them influence with the social elites, and commanded handsome fees. The first-century Sophist would establish himself ►

The message that **Paul** took to the city of Corinth, where he ministered for 18 months from AD 50 (Acts 18:1-18), met cultures and worldviews that had their own ideas about what is wise and successful, epitomized by the influential **Sophists** and their disciples. By around AD 55, the impact of secular society on the Corinthian church had become so profound that Paul wrote this letter from Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8) to address the problems that had become widely known, and to respond to some of their questions.

---

## Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-31.

1. What is Paul's description of what the Corinthians were like *before* their calling (v 26)?
2. What is his description of what they have become *after* their calling (vv 2, 4-9, 30-31)?
3. Based on the whole chapter, what has brought about this change?

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4. What problems in the Corinthian church have been reported to Paul (vv 10-12, 18-24)?

5. What are Paul's solutions to these problems? How do these solutions solve their problems?

6. What do we learn about what was most valued in Corinthian society (vv 17-29; cf. 2:1, 4)?

7. Why can't the Corinthian Christians boast about themselves or their salvation (vv 26-31)?

in a Graeco-Roman city by inviting the public to a 'declamation', where, to demonstrate his knowledge and eloquence, he would speak on a topic chosen by the audience. Those Sophists that the city embraced would form schools around themselves to train the sons of upper-class citizens to argue in the criminal and civil courts. Students would copy their teacher's mannerisms, and the successful Sophist would be invited to speak in the secular assembly and on behalf of the city. Professional jealousy between competing Sophists and their schools was rife, and students would seek to outdo one another in loyalty and zeal for their teacher by exposing the shortcomings of other Sophists.<sup>1</sup>

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## "Saints"

Despite their divisions and sinfulness, Paul describes the Corinthian Christians as "sanctified in Christ Jesus". They are "called saints" (1:2); the ESV (with most English translations) adds "to be", which is not present in the Greek text. 'Sainthood' is a gift given by God, not something achieved by our works. Every believer has this status through their union with Christ, who is their sanctification (1:30). But the saints are called to be and to live out what they are through their love for God and neighbour and through their lives of good works.

## God revealing himself in weakness

GOD HIMSELF HAD SANCTIFIED the church in Corinth: they are called '**saints**' (1:2). Yet they present as one of the most 'unholy' churches in the New Testament. In chapter 1, they are revealed as a divided, quarrelling church (1:10-17). They have formed factions around different leaders in the same way that the disciples of the Sophists did. This is a serious problem which Paul confronts in the first four chapters of the letter, where he will call on them to be what they are in Christ Jesus: the holy church of God.

God has made the Corinthians his saints and revealed himself in a way that the world in its 'wisdom' cannot understand (1:21): in weakness and suffering. The gospel proclaims a crucified Messiah—an apparent contradiction in terms. The eloquence or impressiveness of the messenger, so important in Graeco-Roman society, works against God's revelation in weakness. While the topic of a Sophist's declamation was irrelevant to showing his prowess, the content of Paul's message—Christ crucified—was everything. Because Jesus Christ "died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures" (15:3), fights about what church leader they belonged to—as well as the opinions of society's leaders—were stupid and irrelevant. But the salvation of the Corinthian believers on the Day of Christ would shame the rulers of this world and their 'wisdom' (1:27).

Graeco-Roman society viewed crucifixion with horror. Cicero (106-43 BC) said that "the mere mention" of "the very word 'cross'" is "unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man" and should be removed "even from their thoughts".<sup>2</sup> Worshipping a crucified man was deemed stupid and idiotic. In fact, a key Jewish argument against Christianity was the cross of Jesus itself: "Now if Jesus was crucified, his body then, according to you, is cursed, because it is written in the Torah ['a hanged man is cursed by God' (Deut 21:23)]".<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Muslims today deny that Jesus was crucified or died at all, as they believe it is utterly offensive for a prophet of God to be

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so humiliated.<sup>4</sup> Others today argue that the message of the cross is a sick form of ‘cosmic child abuse’ presenting an angry, immoral Father who unfairly punishes his innocent child for other people’s crimes.

But the New Testament is clear: Christ’s bloody sacrifice was to bear God’s wrath in the place of sinners to satisfy the demands of God’s justice (Isa 52:13-53:12; Rom 3:25-26; 2 Cor 5:21). Paul elsewhere explains that Christ bore this divine curse “for us”: we had failed to keep the law, but in his crucifixion Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law “by becoming a curse for us” (Gal 3:10-13). This is what theologians call ‘penal substitutionary atonement’. It is foolishness to the world, but it is

the wisdom of God that makes believers sing: “O sweet exchange [...] that the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous one, and that the righteousness of one should justify many transgressors”.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus Christ is our ‘redemption’ (1 Cor 1:30). By nature, we are slaves to sin, death and the devil. We needed to be bought back at a price (6:19-20, 7:23). Christ crucified was the price of our redemption (Rom 3:24; Heb 9:12), and we are now freed to serve our redeemer. This is what Paul preached and what the Corinthian Christians accepted.

How is it that they accepted this message while society’s great and powerful rejected it? Paul now turns to this question.

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### **Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-16.**

**8.** How is it that Paul and the Corinthian Christians could understand and accept the gospel of the crucified Christ (vv 10-16; cf. 1:4-6)?

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9. Why don't "the rulers of this age" understand and accept this message (vv 8, 11, 14; cf. 1:22, 27-29)?

10. How did these realities influence the way Paul communicated his message (vv 1-5, 13; cf. 1:17)?

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## The Spirit's power: saving us through the gospel

PAUL WAS NOT INTERESTED IN THE eloquence that was prized in Graeco-Roman society. He came "in weakness and in fear and much trembling" and his speech and message "were not in plausible words of wisdom" (2:3-4). This manner of communicating allowed the gospel of the cross to do the work (2:1-5). The fact that anyone accepts the gospel of Christ crucified is a miracle of

God brought about by God's activity in that person. Believers are not smarter than others, but have been *called* by God (1:1-2, 26-28). Consequently, they have received the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:12). The gospel of the cross can only be understood and believed by those who have God's Holy Spirit, in accordance with his own purposes and choice (cf. Eph 2:8-9).





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- Are you tempted to boast about your salvation? If so, why? If not, why not?

- Is it okay to have favourite Christian ministers or preachers? If so, what are the limits of following such people? What are the dangers?

## » Give thanks and pray

- Thank God for the salvation, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption found in Christ. Thank God for the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- Ask God to strengthen you to see the message of Christ crucified as the power of God and the wisdom of God. Ask God for wisdom in presenting the gospel so that its power is obvious.

### Endnotes

- 1 BW Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The influence of secular ethics and social change*, Eerdmans, 2001, pp 31-43.
- 2 Cicero, *For Rabirius on a Charge of Treason*, 5:16.
- 3 *The Polemic of Nestor the Priest*, 1:72-157, in DW Chapman, *Ancient Jewish and Christian Perceptions on Crucifixion*, Mohr Siebeck, 2008, p 250. This is the earliest Jewish anti-Christian writing we have, dated from the 9th century AD. See also the reported objection of Trypho: "But this so-called Christ of yours was dishonourable and inglorious, so much so that the last curse contained in the law of God fell on him, for he was crucified"; Justin Martyr (c. AD 100-165), *Dialogue with Trypho*, pp 32, 89-90.
- 4 The Koran, Surah 4:157-158.
- 5 *The Epistle to Diognetes*, 8, dated from the 2nd or 3rd century AD.