

Bible Overview: 1 Corinthians

Shopping around for a church

For seven years I was minister in the South London suburb of Mitcham. What had once been a leafy, Surrey town, was in a period of rapid transition and in a relatively short period changed from a fairly monochrome residential area into a cosmopolitan and diverse community. In some senses the local church benefited from this as Christians from the world church joined what had formerly been a white, predominantly middle class congregation. The church changed to reflect the community in which it was set.

I remember a young woman, either a student or a young professional, greeting me at the door of the church after a Sunday morning service. She was confident and self-assured and asked me quite directly, 'why should I join your church?' I was pleased, however, that my response wrong-footed her. 'I am not sure that you should. What you need is a church which feeds you well enough so that you are not spiritually hungry and exercises you well enough so that you are not spiritually flabby but whether or not that is here I cannot say.'

There was an old adage often shared among peripatetic Christians who made it their business to flit from church to church in the vain hope of finding one that would be good enough for them, 'If ever you find a perfect church, don't join it, as you are sure to spoil it.' However, it's hard to know how anyone could not have reservations about the church at Corinth. The church was torn apart by divisions as powerful leaders and their followers vied with each other. One church member was having an affair with his stepmother but this was being justified in terms of freedom in Christ. Meanwhile, disputes between believers were being taken to the secular courts and while some members were visiting prostitutes other members were advocating celibacy. The challenge of breaking with a pagan past while living in a pagan society, disagreements about the role of men and women, order in worship where prophetic utterances and speaking in tongues were commonplace, the communion services being total chaos, and the fact that a number of members seemed not to believe in the resurrection were just some of the issues facing the church.

The city

The ancient city of Corinth was situated on a narrow isthmus between Aegean and Adriatic Seas. It was a cosmopolitan port city, boasting two harbours and a trade centre as well as many taverns and drinking houses. The city received shipping from Italy, Sicily, and Spain, as well as from Asia Minor, Syria, Phoenicia, and Egypt. Its eastern port was Cenchrea, located on the Saronic Gulf (Acts 18:18; Rom 16:1); its western harbour was at Lechaemum on the Corinthian Gulf. To avoid sailing a considerable extra distance around the dangerous coastline of southern Greece, ships either docked at the isthmus and transported their cargoes by land vehicles from one sea to another or, if the ships were small, they were dragged the five miles across the isthmus, a problem that centuries later was solved by the building of a canal. Its proximity to the seas and its nearness to Athens, only 45 miles to the northeast, gave Corinth a position of strategic commercial importance and military defence. Corinth was destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C., only to be re-established in 46 B.C. by Julius Caesar. Caesar populated it with Roman war veterans and freedmen and by the time Paul was writing his letters the city was more important

than Athens. Roman Corinth had roughly 80,000 people with an additional 20,000 in nearby rural areas.

In the reign of Augustus (27 B.C.-A.D. 14) and his successors, Corinth was built on the pattern of a Roman city, with all remaining buildings reclaimed and new ones added in and around the old market place (the *agora*), the place in which the *bema* (the judgment tribunal platform) stood, where Paul appeared before Gallio (Acts 18:12). In this period Corinth became the capital of the Roman province of Achaia (cf. Acts 18:1, 2), which included all the Peloponnesus and most of the rest of Greece and Macedonia. Corinth again became prosperous, with vast income coming from its sea trade and from the development of its arts and industries. Its pottery and Corinthian brass (a mixture of gold, silver, and copper) were world famous.

The athletic games at Corinth were second only to the Olympics. Every two years the celebration of the Isthmian games made a considerable contribution to the city's life. With the games came an emphasis on luxury and profligacy. The sanctuary of Poseidon was given over to the worship of the Corinthian Aphrodite (goddess of love), whose temple on the Acrocorinth, a steep flat-topped rock on top of which was an acropolis, dominated the city. This temple was located about seven miles east of Corinth, not far from the eastern end of the isthmus. The temple boasted more than 1,000 female cult prostitutes and many people visited Corinth on account of these priestesses. Aristophanes used the expression 'to live like a Corinthian' to describe a life of sexual immorality and corruption. Corinth housed other religious shrines too, most notably a temple to Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, as well as sites for worshipping Isis, the Egyptian goddess of seafarers, and her Greek male counterpart Poseidon. Less directly religious in nature, but even more pervasive, were the Greek ideals of individualism, equality, freedom, and distrust of authority.

Paul arrived in Corinth on what we call his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 18:1-18). Such an important multi-cultural city was strategic for the preaching of the gospel for from here the message could become widely spread. Yet it was not an easy place to proclaim the Christian message. At first Paul made his home with Priscilla and Aquila. He kept himself by making tents and on the Sabbath Days preached in the synagogue. Jewish opposition forced Paul to move to the house of Titus Justus. Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, was converted and when the proconsul, Gallio, refused to take action against Paul it enabled him to stay in Corinth for 18 months, substantially longer than he had spent anywhere else. The church at Corinth may well have consisted of a cluster of house churches each with its own leader or 'patron'.

The letters

There is a problem over how many letters Paul actually wrote to the Corinthians. A reasonable explanation is that there were at least four letters. The first letter was misunderstood (1 Corinthians 5:9-11). Following this, Paul may well have received oral reports of disorders in the church at Corinth (including the report from Chloe's household, 1 Corinthians 1:11) and a delegation from the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 16:17). The second letter we call 1 Corinthians. It is possible that Paul later paid them a 'painful visit' perhaps because they did not heed the advice of his letter (1 Corinthians). Upon his return to Ephesus, he sent the church a 'sorrowful letter' (2 Corinthians 2:4; 7:8, 9), probably carried by Titus, which Paul later regretted writing (2 Corinthians 7:8). The fourth letter we call 2 Corinthians. (This is not the only

interpretation but it is the easiest). Helped by evidence such as the dating for the proconsulship of Gallio, many scholars generally accept a date for 1 Corinthians of A.D. 53-57.

The purpose of 1 Corinthians

There are two main reasons for the writing of 1 Corinthians. Paul had received reports about the church that had made him very uncomfortable, so there were issues that he felt he needed to address. The Corinthians had also sent to Paul asking his advice on certain questions, so there were issues to which he needed to respond. In general terms, 1 Corinthians fits into the wider canon of Holy Scripture by addressing these issues and providing principles for similar issues.

In the first part of the letter, Paul takes up the matters that have been reported to him. Power struggles and factions are causing divisions in the church, which have even resulted in some members taking other members to court. There are also problems associated with the extremely pagan society. The church had a diverse membership of Greek, Roman (attested by Latin names such as Gaius, Fortunatus, Crispus and Justus), Jewish and Oriental people that reflected the culture in which it was set. Nevertheless, this brought its own problems, not only the cultural divisions, but also the background of many of the new Christians, which had not even been the morality of Judaism. There has been a case of incest and Paul speaks against it.

In the second part of the letter, Paul answers a variety of questions from the Corinthian church and gives some teaching on various matters, some of which seem more relevant to our present day context than others. Many of the Christians were immature, undisciplined extremists. The services were chaotic and in particular there were problems in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the right use of spiritual gifts, and over the dress and role of women in the church and its meetings. There is a long section on marriage and the single life. A particular concern was whether it is appropriate to eat meat that has been associated with the worship of idols and whether a Christian can in good conscience attend social functions in a pagan temple.

Intellectually there may have been early Gnostic influences, such as the belief in the immortality of the soul rather than the resurrection of the body. Some of the members may have claimed some kind of superior knowledge. Possibly some did not understand the Christian teaching of the resurrection, which forms a large part of Paul's response.

In a church with a variety of problems, a key question is whether these various problems have their root in a common cause. Spiritual immaturity seems to be a consistent problem and a quality of those who are spiritually immature is that they judge themselves to be mature (1 Corinthians 4:8). Principles of secular leadership, rather than Christian servant-leadership, seem to have pervaded the church, which allowed the church to be unduly influenced by the pagan ideas in the local community. An important idea in the pagan society was the separation between spirit and matter, a philosophy found in Plato. This dualism allowed that religion was a matter of the spirit so that the body, in life and in death, was unimportant. Doctrinally, many Corinthians did not believe in the resurrection of the body. Ethically, they could accept sexual immorality, eating food sacrificed to idols and drunkenness.

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Groups of Christians can get too attached to a leader (e.g. Paul for the Gentiles, Apollos for those who liked eloquent preaching, Peter for the Jews, Christ for those who feel so superior as to consider themselves the only real Christians) but their unity is in Christ. He also implores them to 'speak the same thing' (KJV) or 'agree with one another' (NIV). Broad churches often glory in their diversity but Paul glories in unity in Christ. Paul's preaching is not clever, yet it is in its apparent foolishness that the cross has its power.

1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 6:12-20

A case of sexual immorality, shocking even to the pagans, has occurred in Corinth. A man has married (implied by the context) his stepmother. No doubt some, through an appeal to Christian liberty, justified this when, in fact, freedom in Christ is freedom to obey Christ rather than lawlessness. Short-term discipline is important for the long-term good of the individual and of the whole church. Christians have to live in the world but they are not 'in fellowship' with people who were once part of the church community but are now living in gross immorality (not only sexual sin but also to other sins – greed, idolatry, slander, drunkenness, swindling/extortion). In the common meal Christians show their unity, but not with this kind of person. Paul deals with the issue of abuses of the principle of Christian liberty. What we do with our bodies matters, for Christians not only believe in the immortality of the soul but also in the resurrection of the body.

1 Corinthians 8:1-9:1

Christians in Britain are not normally called upon to decide whether to eat meat that has been involved in idolatrous worship but there are parallel issues that demand our careful consideration.

1 Corinthians 11:2-33

Paul rules that women should pray with their heads covered. An unveiled woman could be mistaken for a prostitute. It was very important that Christian worship looked different from the worship of Aphrodite. The interpretation that the wearing of a veil is determined purely by the cultural context is largely though not universally accepted. The symbolic nature of the meal in our modern celebrations means that a lot of the issues do not apply but the principle of self-examination is still very important. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is handed down to us.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Christian love is different both from that offered at the temple of Aphrodite and from spiritual pride. It is Christ-like love, in the spirit of Jesus. At the heart of a discussion about the right exercise of spiritual gifts, Paul shows that the most important characteristic of the Christian is love, love as demonstrated by Jesus.

1 Corinthians 15:1-8; 12-20; 35-38; 42-44

The event on which the Christian faith either stands or falls is well attested. Paul expounds the resurrection hope. The historical validity of the resurrection is evidence by eyewitnesses. Christ dying for our sins implies his sinlessness. If he did not rise there is no resurrection for anyone. Using the seed analogy, Paul shows that the body undergoes a transformation to be ready to live with God in eternity. Those who belong to Christ will ultimately be with him and like him.

Outline and application

While there is some value in the more complex outlines provided by a variety of biblical commentators, such outlines are very difficult to remember and, therefore, there is some value in a simple and more memorable outline. The letter can be divided into two parts, disorders that had been reported to Paul and problems that the Corinthians had raised.

Disorders reported to Paul

- 1:10-4:21 The Spirit of divisiveness
- 5:1-13 Discipline over immorality
- 6:1-11 Appeals to pagan courts
- 6:12-20 Moral lapses

Problems raised by the Corinthians

- 7:1-40 Marriage
- 8:1-9:1 Meat sacrificed to idols
- 11:2-34 Disorders in worship
- 12:1-14:40 Spiritual gifts
- 15:1-58 Resurrection

Conclusion

- 16:1-24 Collections, travel plans, greetings

The church at Corinth was facing so many of the problems and underlying issues that we face in the twenty-first century. In our society, for the first time in hundreds of years, a Christian perspective on many matters can no longer be assumed. The background of the society in which we live becomes more 'pagan' and 'secular' each year. Even the contemporary 'evangelical' church is torn apart by factions, many that are underpinned by denominationalism or by an unswerving loyalty to a particular leader. What believers need to show now, as then, was that the wisdom of Christ, which might seem foolish, weak and naive to the world, is wiser than the wisdom of the world. Craig Blomberg works hard to show that, in each case, the world's wisdom (human reason, unbridled freedom, litigation, no-fault divorce) conflicts with God-given wisdom (purity, forgiveness, reconciliation, and mutual faithfulness). Believers then and now must learn that decisions should not be made according to some limited human ethical system but according to whether they will contribute to the building up of the kingdom of God.

The right exercise of Christian freedom and the danger of sexual immorality are as much contemporary problems as they were in the New Testament church. The church today still faces issues to do with mission, fellowship, divisions, responsible giving, spiritual gifts, and the right order of worship. Authority, discipline and patterns of leadership are also relevant to us. Issues such as suffering, death and the resurrection hope need to be addressed, all the more so when even regular church-goers seem to be confused about matters such as reincarnation.

Paul's nine letters to New Testament churches bring a variety of doctrinal and ethical teaching to biblical theology. The wide range of practical and theological issues addresses brings a richness to biblical theology to which 1 Corinthians makes an important contribution.

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Downloads

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