

First Corinthians

Introduction

The church at Corinth was a seriously troubled church. Infected with sexual immorality, split by actions that dragged each other into court, and crippled by abuse of the spiritual gifts this church was in need of radical spiritual surgery. Though true believers had a lot to do and Paul wrote to them twice giving them his pastoral insights. The letter revolves around the theme of problems in Christian conduct in the church. It thus has to do with progressive sanctification, the continuing development of a holy character. Obviously Paul was personally concerned with the Corinthians' problems, revealing a true pastor's (shepherd's) heart.

Background

Paul first preached the gospel in Corinth while on his second missionary journey, about A.D. 50. While there he lived and worked with Aquila and Priscilla who were of the same trade, tent-makers (Acts 18:3). This letter was written about A.D. 55. towards the end of Paul's three-year residency in Ephesus (Acts 20:31).

Corinth was a large metropolis (approximately 700,000; about two-thirds of whom were slaves) located on a narrow isthmus between the Aegean Sea and the Adriatic Sea that connected the Peloponnesus with Northern Greece. And though prosperous with a thriving commerce, from man's point of view, Paul and his associates may have wondered about what kind of success the gospel of God's righteousness would have in a city like Corinth. As a city, it had a reputation for gross materialism and deep sinfulness. The city was filled with shrines and temples with the most prominent being the temple of Aphrodite that sat on top of an 1800-foot promontory called the Acrocorinthus. In the earliest Greek literature it was linked with wealth (Homer *Iliad* 2. 569-70) and immorality. When Plato referred to a prostitute, he used the expression "Corinthian girl" (*Republic* 404d). The playwright Philetaerus (*Athenaeus* 13. 559a) titled a burlesque play *Ho Korinthiastes*, which basically means "The Lecher." Aristophanes coined the verb *korinthiazomai*, "to act as a Corinthian," which came to mean, "to practice fornication." According to Strabo much of the wealth and vice in Corinth centered around the temple of Aphrodite and its thousand temple prostitutes. For this reason a proverb warned, "Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth."

Summary

In chapters 1-4, Paul received reports of problems in the church in Corinth and therefore addresses their problems and disorders, "*there are quarrels among you*" (1:11). Paul asks believers to "*consider your calling*" (1:26-30). He then declares three times that God "*has chosen*" them and "*because of Him you are in Christ Jesus*". This truth is joyful and relieving to believers that God is in control and is the orchestrator of our lives.

In chapters 5-11, Paul exposes all of the immorality that was occurring in the church at Corinth. These include sexual immorality, issues of marriage, and lawsuits with other believers. *“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God”* (6:9). Paul warns believers to be careful how you live, *“For you have been bought with a price”* (vs 20),

In chapters 12-14, he clears up some of the confusion about practices of worship. He corrects difficult doctrines that had caused divisions. Some of these differences were the role of women in worship, the use of spiritual gifts, and observing the Lord’s Supper. *“For God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints”* (14:33).

In chapters 15-16 Paul deals with the topic of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the topic that is, *“of first importance”* to Paul. It is here we find the most important information on planet Earth, the Gospel of Jesus Christ in verses 1-4. *“Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures”* (15:1-4).

Themes:

Unity Among Believers - The Corinthian church was divided over leadership. Some followed the teachings of Paul, others favored the words of Cephas, and some preferred what Apollos had to say. Intellectual pride, Paul pointed out, was firmly at the center of this spirit of division. In his letter, Paul urged the Corinthians to focus on Christ and not his messengers. The church is Christ's body where God's spirit dwells. If the church family is separated by disunity, then it ceases to work together and grow in love with Jesus Christ as the head.

Spiritual Freedom - The Corinthian believers were divided on certain practices not expressly forbidden in Scripture, such as eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Self-centeredness was the root of this division. In such matters, Paul stressed spiritual freedom, although not at the expense of other believers whose faith might be fragile. If we have freedom in an area that another Christian might consider sinful behavior, we are to be sensitive and considerate, sacrificing our freedom out of love for our weaker brothers and sisters.

Holy Living - The Corinthian church had lost its appreciation for the holiness of God which is our standard for holy living. In doing so, the church could no longer effectively minister to one another or be a witness to unbelievers outside the church.

Church Discipline - By ignoring blatant sin among its members, the Corinthian church was further contributing to division and weakness in the body. Paul gave practical instructions for how to deal with immorality in the church.

Proper Worship - An overarching theme in the book of 1 Corinthians is the need for true Christian love--love that will settle lawsuits and conflicts between brothers. A lack of genuine love was clearly an undercurrent in the Corinthian church, creating disorder in worship and the misuse of spiritual gifts. Paul spent a great deal of time describing the proper role of spiritual gifts and dedicated an entire chapter--1 Corinthians 13--to the definition of love.

The Hope of Resurrection - The believers in Corinth were divided because of misunderstandings over the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and the future resurrection of his followers. Paul wrote to clear confusion on this crucial matter which is so important to living out our faith in light of eternity.

Key Words:

A key word in concept is "correction" as Paul sought to correct the problems in Corinth, but "wisdom," contrasting God's wisdom with man's, is also a key word of the book. "Wisdom" occurs 29 times in 22 verses.

Key Verses:

- **1:18-25.** For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1:19 For it is written, "***I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will thwart the cleverness of the intelligent.***" 1:20 Where is the wise man? Where is the expert in the Mosaic law? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made the wisdom of the world foolish? 1:21 For since in the wisdom of God, the world by its wisdom did not know God, God was pleased to save those who believe by the foolishness of preaching. 1:22 For Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks ask for wisdom, 1:23 but we preach about a crucified Christ, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. 1:24 But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. 1:25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.
- **1:30-31.** He is the reason you have a relationship with Christ Jesus (of Him you are in Christ Jesus), who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 1:31 so that, as it is written, "***Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.***"
- **2:14.** The unbeliever (the natural man) does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him. And he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

- **6:19-20.** Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? 6:20 For you were bought with a price. Therefore glorify God with your body.
- **10:12-13.** So let the one who thinks he is standing be careful that he does not fall. 10:13 No trial has overtaken you that is not faced by others. And God is faithful, who will not let you be tried too much, but with the trial will also provide a way through it so that you may be able to endure.

Key Chapters:

Chapter 13, the great chapter on love, undoubtedly stands out as the pinnacle chapter of this book. Certainly, there has never been a greater explanation of love written.

Relevance

This letter continues to be timely for the church today. It both instructs and inspires. Christians are still powerfully influenced by their culture. Most of the questions and problems that confronted the church at Corinth are still very much with us – the problems of spiritual immaturity, instability, divisions, jealousy, envy, lawsuit, marital difficulties, sexual immorality, and the misuse of spiritual gifts.

Spend time this month reading 1 Corinthians yourself as think of how it applies to OCPV today.

Next Month: Second Corinthians