

Week of July 2 - 8

First Corinthians Overview

This letter was probably written in the spring of 57 A.D., during Paul's third missionary journey.

Corinth was located on the Isthmus of Greece (called Achaia in the Bible) between the Ionian Sea and the Aegean Sea, about 50 miles east of Athens. Corinth of Paul's day was a relatively new city since the old Corinth was burned in 146 B.C. by the Romans. It was devoted to the gods, and a hundred years had to pass before the city could be rebuilt. In 46 B.C., Julius Caesar rebuilt it and filled it with a colony of veterans and freed slaves, and named it Julia Corinthus. It soon became an important commercial center.

With a population of 400K and being a center of commerce in the Mediterranean world, it was a place for all sorts of vice. The temple of Aphrodite hosted 1,000 priestesses dedicated to prostitution in the name of religion. It's incredible a church even existed at all in Corinth.

The church was established during Paul's second missionary journey and was adversely affected by the immoral environment found in the city. Pride caused division in the church and disruption in its services. Immorality found its way into the church, giving it a bad reputation. Christians were taking their problems with each other to the heathen courts instead of working them out by themselves. There were questions about marriage, meats sacrificed to idols, women praying and prophesying with heads uncovered, the use of spiritual gifts, the resurrection from the dead, and the collection for the Christians in Jerusalem. The church had problems and questions that needed to be answered. Paul heard about their issues while he was in Ephesus and wrote this letter to address them.

Division in the Church (1 Corinthians 1:1-17)

As Paul opened this letter, he expressed thankfulness that the Corinthians had been blessed by God, given many spiritual gifts, and were eagerly waiting for the revelation of the Lord. He immediately begins dealing with the first problem, to stop arguing among yourselves. Let there be real harmony so that there won't be splits in the church. He plead with them to be of one mind, united in thought and purpose. He had heard of their arguments and quarrels as some were saying, "I am a follower of Paul," and others saying they followed Apollos or Peter; and some said they alone were the real followers of Christ. And so, in effect, they had broken Christ into many pieces.

The Wisdom and Power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18-31)

"So, what about these wise men, these scholars, these brilliant debaters of the world's great affairs? God has made them look foolish and their wisdom useless nonsense. God saw to it that the world would never find God through human devices, and then he stepped in and saved all those who believed his message, which the world calls foolish and silly. It seemed foolish to the Jews because they wanted a sign from Heaven as proof that what was preached was true, and it was foolish to the Gentiles because they believed only what agreed with their philosophy and seemed wise to them. When we preached about Christ dying to save them, the Jews are offended, and the Gentiles said it's all nonsense. But God opened the eyes of those called to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, to see that Christ is the power of God to save them; Christ himself is the center of God's wise plan for their salvation. This so-called "foolish" plan of God is far wiser than the wisest plan of the smartest man.

Few who follow Christ have big names or power or wealth. Instead, God deliberately chose to use ideas the world considers foolish and of little worth to shame those people considered by the world as wise and great. He chose a plan despised by the world, counted as nothing at all, and used it to bring down to nothing those the world considers great so that no one anywhere can ever brag in the presence of God.

For it is from God alone that we have life through Christ Jesus. He showed us God's plan of salvation; he was the one who made us acceptable to God; he made us pure and holy and gave himself to purchase our salvation. If anyone is going to boast, let him boast only of what the Lord has done.

Paul's Message of True Wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:1-16)

Continuing to talk about the foolishness of boasting in human wisdom, Paul reminded them of how he came to them. He didn't use lofty words and profound wisdom to tell them God's secret plan. His message and preaching were very plain. Rather than using clever and persuasive speeches, he relied only on the power of the Holy Spirit. He did this so they would trust not in human wisdom but in the power of God.

He proclaimed a type of wisdom, however, which came from God and described the process by which God revealed this wisdom through His Spirit. Paul then compared the difference between the "natural man" (one who depends upon his own human wisdom) who does not receive the things of the Spirit, and the "spiritual man" (one led by the Spirit of God, such as Paul) who has the mind of Christ.

On Divisions in the Church (1 Corinthians 3:1-23)

Paul continued to deal with the problem of division. To help them understand the foolishness of exalting preachers over one another, Paul showed their relationship to one other and to their work, which was building the temple of God.

He told them to stop fooling yourselves. If they counted themselves above average in intelligence, as judged by this world's standards, they had better put this all aside and be a fool rather than let it hold them back from the true wisdom from above. The wisdom of this world is foolishness to God. As it says in Job, God uses man's own brilliance to trap him; he stumbles over his own "wisdom" and falls. And in Psalms, we are told that the Lord knows full well how the human mind reasons and how foolish and futile it is.

So, don't be proud of following the wise men of this world. God has already given the Corinthians everything they needed. He gave them Paul and Apollos and Peter as helpers. He gave them the whole world to use. He gave them all of the present and all of the future. All are theirs, and they belong to Christ, and Christ is God's.

The Apostles of Christ (1 Corinthians 4:1-21)

Paul said he and Apollos should be looked upon as Christ's servants who distribute God's blessings by explaining God's secrets. The most important thing about a servant is that he does just what his master tells him to do. "What about me?" Paul asked. "Haven't I been a good servant? Well, I don't worry about what you think about this or what anyone else thinks. I don't even trust my own judgment on this point. My conscience is clear, but even that isn't final proof. It is the Lord himself who must examine me and decide."

So be careful not to jump to conclusions before the Lord returns as to whether someone is a good servant or not. When the Lord comes, he will turn on the light so that everyone can see exactly what each one of us is like, deep down in our hearts. Then everyone will know why we have been doing the Lord's work. At that time, God will give to each one whatever praise is coming to him.

Paul's purpose was not to shame them, but to warn them because he was sending Timothy to remind them of what is proper, and he himself was coming to deal with those who are "puffed up," if necessary.

Paul added that he knew some of them had become proud, thinking that he was afraid to come to deal with them. But he said he would come, and soon, if the Lord will let him, and then he'll find out whether these proud men are just big talkers or whether they really have God's power. The Kingdom of God is not just talking; it is living by God's power. Which do they choose? Should he come with punishment and scolding, or should he come with quiet love and gentleness?

A Report of Immorality (1 Corinthians 5:1-13)

Having dealt with the problem of division in the first four chapters, Paul now addressed the issue of immorality in the church at Corinth. He described the particular case at hand, one which even pagan Gentiles would find shameful, that of a man in the church who was living in sin with his father's wife. Rebuking them for being "puffed up" instead of mourning, Paul instructed them to "deliver such a one to Satan," giving them reasons why this action was necessary.

Clarifying what he had said in an earlier letter to the Corinthians, Paul explained he wasn't talking about unbelievers who live in sexual sin or are greedy cheats and thieves and idol worshipers, for a person can't live in this world without being with people like that. What he meant was that they were not to keep company with anyone who claimed to be a brother Christian but indulges in sexual sins, or is greedy, or is a swindler, or worships idols, or is a drunkard, or abusive. Don't even eat lunch with such a person.

Lastly, he added that It wasn't his job to judge outsiders. But it certainly is everyone's job to judge and deal firmly with those who are members of the church and who are sinning in these ways. God alone is the Judge of those on the outside. But they must deal with this man and put him out of their church.

Lawsuits among Christians (1 Corinthians 6:1-8)

Having seen that the Christians at Corinth were filled with strife, envy, and divisions and that Paul frequently described them as being "puffed up," they were also guilty of suing each other in court.

Paul said, "Someday, Christians are going to judge and govern the world? So why can't they decide even these little things among themselves? Don't they realize that Christians will judge and reward the very angels in Heaven? So, they should be able to decide their problems down here on earth easily enough. Why then go to outside judges who are not even Christians?"

"I am trying to make them ashamed. Isn't there anyone in all the church at Corinth who is wise enough to decide these arguments? But, instead, one Christian sues another and accuses his Christian brother in front of unbelievers.

This was a real defeat for them as Christians. Why not just accept mistreatment and leave it at that? It would be far more honoring to the Lord to let themselves be cheated. But, instead, they are the ones who do wrong, cheating others, even your own brothers.

God to Be Glorified in the Body (1 Corinthians 6:9-20)

The last half of this chapter deals with the problem of immorality in Corinth. What might have been acceptable behavior with their bodies before becoming Christians is no longer acceptable, for even their bodies belong to the Lord, whose Spirit indwells them, and who will one day raise them from the dead by His power. Instead, they should glorify God with their bodies.

Paul said that those who live immoral lives, who are idol worshipers, adulterers, or homosexuals would have no share in his Kingdom. Neither will thieves or greedy people, drunkards, slanderers, or robbers. There was a time when some of the Corinthians were just like that, but now their sins are washed away, and they are set apart for God, and he has accepted them because of what the Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit of our God have done for them.