

PREFACE

Last week we placed Paul's journey to Corinth *geographically* and *culturally*, noting the peculiar location of the city on the land bridge (or isthmus) between Peloponnesus and mainland Greece, and the distinctive nature of the Corinthian culture, with its heady mix of religions and its importance of business and trade.

This week we need to place Paul's first visit to Corinth *historically*, by means of the record in The Acts of the Apostles.

Read Acts 18:1-11.

As was pointed out last week, Paul's first visit to Corinth took place around AD 50. He probably wrote this letter—properly, dictated to his amanuensis—between AD 55 and 57, from Ephesus during his third missionary journey. After writing the letter in Ephesus, he would continue on, cross the Aegean Sea and retrace his route from the second missionary journey, revisiting in turn Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth. Then from Corinth he would turn around and go back the way he came, stopping once again at the same churches until he returned to Asia.

THE LETTER'S ORGANIZATION

Sandwiched between Paul's salutation and concluding thoughts, our first letter to the Corinthian church is divided into two large sections.

The first—from 1:10 to 6:20—contains his response to reports he has been receiving from third parties, as well as Paul's recollections from his time in their midst. He begins this section, in v1:10, almost with the abrupt sharpness that he employed in his Galatian letter, immediately after his greeting and expression of thanksgiving.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-11.

For several chapters—until the end of Chapter Four—Paul addresses the divisions in the church, as well as the church's quarrels with him personally. This will include a defense of the gospel itself, an explanation of the work of the Holy Spirit, and an explanation of how the church is to function in God's economy. He concludes with an eloquent statement on the centrality of Christ Jesus.

Divisions in the Church**Read 1 Corinthians 1:12-13.**

Right off the bat we have something as relevant to us today as the (fake) headlines we will read tomorrow. How many churches have split apart, and more often than not eventually died, because of different factions following different personalities. The roots of this come from the first century.

In the next section, which begins with v18, Paul says the answer to all this division in the church is for everyone to unite behind Christ and His gospel. And what, in just two words, *is* the gospel?

Read 1 Corinthians 1:22-23. ("Christ crucified")

Who cares who it was that taught you—focus on that which is important. As he continues into the next chapter, he says the same thing in defense of the message he brought to them.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:2.

Sidebar: It is my habit, as I am reading and rereading the text, to make note of any repetition I find, for that very often reveals the emphasis being made. And I note that from 1:18 to 2:14, Paul refers to “wisdom” and “foolishness” 27 times. Clearly that is Paul’s under-girding theme, which we will be examining when we get there.

In most of Chapter Two Paul explains that it is the Holy Spirit who supplies true wisdom—which to a natural man seems to be foolishness.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:14.

Then he begins Chapter Three by pointing out—in fact, one can almost hear him *crying* out—why teaching the Corinthians was (and remains) so challenging.

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. (1 Corinthians 3:1)

For the rest of Chapter Three Paul is still making his case against following men instead of Christ. His immediate context is the church—how its leaders are merely servants (vv5-9), how it is built with the proper materials (vv10-15), and how it must be protected (vv16-17)—but all this has application for the individual as well.

He closes this by circling back to his opening premise: *You do not belong to men; you belong to Christ.*

Read 1 Corinthians 3:21-23.

Sidebar: Most of us are familiar with Winston Churchill’s famous description of the national interests of Russia in 1939: “I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma...” I am reminded of this when trying to organize the content of this letter into a practical outline. An outline—*any* outline—of a Bible book is just a starting point, for God’s word invariably wraps one thing inside another, inside another. The determined student of God’s word can ferret out personal counsel and truth wrapped inside doctrine, wrapped inside a parable. So even as we try to organize an overview of this letter, be assured that there is much more in every section, every verse, than what I am describing here.

In Chapter Four the apostle addresses head-on his relationship with the church—a response to their criticism of him. After detailing the practical condition and methods of his team—“...and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure...” (v12)—Paul points out his special position in their spiritual upbringing.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:15-16.

Immorality and Litigation

Still basing his remarks on what he has heard or read, Paul opens Chapter Five with a frontal attack on a serious sin being countenanced in the church: an incestuous affair between a man and the wife of his father. His rebuke is unbridled, and he closes Chapter Five by quoting the law in Deuteronomy: "Remove the wicked man from among yourselves."

In Chapter Six Paul addresses another problem in the church—members taking other members to civil court when they have been wronged, instead of keeping it within the church family—and then closes with another form of sexual immorality: visiting prostitutes.

Sidebar: I would caution against thinking, *Since I'm not sleeping with my step-parent, I'm not taking another church member to court, and I am certainly not frequenting prostitutes, then I can just skip Chapter Six. Those sins don't apply to me.* There is far more here to consider besides those particular sins. For example, behind the issue with frequenting prostitutes may lie the philosophical notion that since we are (in Christ) spiritual beings, what we do with the body is of no consequence. After all, isn't this body to be destroyed in the resurrection? To this Paul has an answer.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

So the root of this problem includes far more than sexual sin—and may have direct truths to teach even those *not* involved with their father's wife or a prostitute. When we encounter passages in God's word that seem *not* to speak to our situation or condition, we are to seek the Lord and ask, *What are You teaching me here?*

On Marriage

The second section—from 7:1 to 16:12—contains Paul's response to a letter *from* the Corinthian church that included a number of questions and requests to him for clarification. We need not guess about this; he states it clearly in v1.

Now concerning the things about which you wrote...

Then Paul addresses a number of topics for which the Corinthian believers had sought his counsel—beginning, in Chapter Seven, with marriage, divorce, widows and widowers, and virginity. When I suggested the Thessalonian Letters for a class, Pastor Jeremy approved, but also said, in so many words, "Are you sure you're up to teaching what 2 Thessalonians 2 says about the end times? It's challenging." Well, this study of 1 Corinthians contains a similar minefield: Chapter Seven. Both of our pastors threw up red flags about it, saying it includes some of the toughest passages to interpret.

But, coming into it, I love how the apostle describes the balanced and reciprocal nature of healthy Christian marriage as he opens this treatise. Anyone who accuses Paul of being a woman hater needs to read this.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:2-4.

- "have" each other: hold, possess
- each to "fulfill (conjugal) duties" to the other
- each has "authority" over the others' body

On Food Sacrificed to Idols

Paul opens an extended discussion about food sacrificed to idols in Chapter Eight, and the discussion continues through Chapter Ten. And once again we discover applicable contemporary counsel inside his answer to an ancient problem. My guess is that not one of us has ever had to struggle with the decision to eat or not eat food that has previously been sacrificed to an idol, but look at some of what is touched on within his discussion:

- liberty
Read 1 Corinthians 8:8-9.
- the issue of the apostles being supported by those they serve
Read 1 Corinthians 9:7, 11.
- but also their freedom *not* to be supported
Read 1 Corinthians 9:13-15.
- discipline and self-control
Read 1 Corinthians 9:26-27.
- our response to temptation
Read 1 Corinthians 10:13.
- living for the good of others
Read 1 Corinthians 10:23-24.

Propriety in Worship

In Chapter Eleven the apostle addresses, first, the proper roles of men and women in worship—that is, the God-ordained hierarchy—and, second, the proper administering and receiving of the Lord's Supper.

Spiritual Gifts within the Church

Along with Ephesians 4, Chapters Twelve to Fourteen contain some of God's best counsel on life in the church, summed up nicely for us at the beginning (v12:7)—

But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

and at the very end (14:40).

But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.

Christ's Death and Resurrection

In Chapter Fifteen Paul offers a detailed and exhilarating defense for the bodily resurrection of every believer.

Travel Hopes and Conclusion

Paul closes this letter in Chapter Sixteen with counsel regarding the collection of funds, and his hopes for a return to Corinth (which the Lord granted). And I love one of his final remarks near the end of Chapter Sixteen (vv13-14), for it captures so much in just a few words what the world does not understand about the church.

**Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.
Let all that you do be done in love. (1 Corinthians 16:13-14)**

I would like to close this introductory session by quoting what the late Albert Barnes (mid 1800s) wrote about the study of this letter and, for that matter, *any* portion of God's word.

Albert Barnes: In all Paul's epistles, as in all the Bible, a spirit of candor, humility, prayer, and industry is required. The knowledge of God's truth is to be acquired only by toil, and candid investigation. The mind that is filled with prejudice is rarely enlightened. The proud, unhumbled spirit seldom receives benefit from reading the Bible, or any other book. He acquires the most complete, and the most profound knowledge of the doctrines of Paul, and of the Book of God in general, who comes to the work of interpretation with the most humble heart; and the deepest sense of his dependence on the aid of that Spirit by whom originally the Bible was inspired. For "the meek will he guide in judgment, and the meek will he teach his way" (Psalm 25:9).

**He leads the humble in justice,
And He teaches the humble His way.
(Psalm 25:9 NASB)**