

Paul's "First" Letter to the Church in Corinth (First Corinthians)

Community Group
Fall 2017-Spring 2018

1. Our Goal

- a. Get us in the door and give you an overview.
 - i. Background
 - ii. Themes and Topics
 - iii. Key verses along the way
 - iv. Mention a few tricky sections that you will want to get ahead of.
- b. Includes some of the most often-repeated passages and buzz phrases in Scripture:
 - i. *"Stumbling block to Jews"* (1:23),
 - ii. *"Infants in Christ"* (3:1),
 - iii. *"Fools for Christ's sake"* (4:10),
 - iv. *"Your bodies are the Temple of the Holy Spirit"* (6:19),
 - v. The *"weaker brother"* (8:11-13),
 - vi. *"One body" with "many members"* (12:12).
 - vii. The *"Love Chapter"* (13:1-13).

2. Author

- a. Paul (v.1)
- b. Wrote it from the city of Ephesus (v. 16:8, 16:19)
- c. Interesting Tidbit
 - i. Although is the first recovered, canonical letter from Paul to the Corinthians, it was not his first letter to the Corinthian church.
 - ii. We'll talk more about that in a minute.

3. When Paul Wrote It

- a. The spring of 53, 54, or 55 AD. (16:8; Leviticus 23:11, 15)
- b. Near the end of Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus. (16:5-9; Acts 19:21-22).

4. To Whom Paul Wrote It

- a. To the Church in Corinth that he had planted.
 - i. 1:2: *"The church of God which is at Corinth."*

5. What Events Led Paul To Write It

- a. Background on the city of Corinth:

- i. History

- 1. Greek city. Destroyed in 146 BC during a war with Rome.
 - 2. Re-founded as a Roman colony by Julius Caesar in 44 BC., so the city had been around for about 80 years when Paul wrote this letter.
 - 3. Roman colony at the time Paul wrote First Corinthians.
 - 4. Thought to have around 400,000 people.

- ii. Geographically

- 1. Port city.
 - 2. Located on an isthmus that connected the Greek mainland in the north to the Greek Peloponnesian peninsula to the south.
 - 3. At its narrowest, the isthmus was about 3.7 miles wide with two sea ports on either side.
 - a. So narrow that, sometimes, they would literally just carry boats from one port to the other.
 - b. Later, there was a canal put in.
 - 4. Made it a crossroads for traffic b/w the Mediterranean and Aegean sea areas.
 - 5. Lots of money. Lots of commerce. Lots of people who thought they were really smart and had things figured out. Lots of people from all over the place from all kinds of different cultures. Sound familiar?

- iii. Culturally

- 1. "Island of misfit toys."
 - 2. The people who lived there were a wreck.

3. We will cover it in more detail, but basically intellectualism, self-dependence, self-righteousness, immorality, and all of this had lead to many strong divisions in this church God had planted through Paul just a few years earlier.
- b. Background on the church at Corinth
- i. Planted by Paul on his second missionary journey, which places the founding of the church around 50-51 AD, about 2-3 years before Paul wrote First Corinthians.
 - ii. Was coming from the Greek city of Athens.
 - iii. The founding of the church at Corinth is addressed in detail in Acts 18:1-18.
 1. When he arrived at Corinth, Paul met Jews Aquila and Priscilla, fellow tent-makers.
 2. Went to the synagogue to preach and teach.
 3. Chief ruler of the synagogue, Crispus, became a believer.
 4. When other Jews opposed Paul, Paul made his famous statement: *"From now on I will go to the Gentiles."* (Acts 18:6).
 5. God then spoke directly to Paul and said to him: *"Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people." And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.*" (Acts 18:11)
 6. Paul is ultimately hauled in front of a Roman tribunal by the Jews, accused of preaching against the Law, but Paul is quickly released and then later leaves Corinth to continue his second mission trip.
- c. So why Paul wrote it?
- i. The church was looking like the city, sadly.
 - ii. The church was unfortunately reflecting the division and the decay of the culture around it rather than the unity, purity, and strength of the gospel.

- ii. Note: First Corinthians sort of jumps into the middle of an ongoing set of back-and-forth exchanges b/w Paul and the church at Corinth.
 - 1. Paul had written a prior letter to the church. That letter dealt with sexual immorality. (5:9)
 - a. "Old Corinth had gained such a reputation for sexual vice that Aristophanes (ca. 450-385 B.C.) coined the verb *korinthiazō* (= to act like a Corinthian, i.e., to commit fornication)."
 - 2. Sometime later, Paul received an oral report indicating that the church at Corinth had misunderstood his first letter (5:10) and that the church was plagued with the problems of division (1:10), sexual immorality (5:1), social snobbery (11:18), and other issues.
 - 3. Around the same time as the oral report, Paul received a letter from the church at Corinth to Paul that displayed confusion over marriage (7:1), divorce (8:1), participation in pagan religions (12:1), order within corporate worship (15:12), and the bodily resurrection of believers (35:1).
- iii. In response to what he knew about the city of Corinth and what he heard about how the church at Corinth was going, Paul wrote the epistle that we see in First Corinthians that we will be studying.

6. Main Theme

- a. Having a divided church that had taken on the ways of the culture surrounding it come together in a unity and holiness undergirded by faith in and love for Christ to work toward the advancement of the gospel.

7. Key Topics Covered

- a. To use an analogy, I want to show you the main rivers and how various tributaries feed into them.

- b. Keep in mind: Although Paul is writing in the context of an ongoing discussion with Corinth, God is speaking here on the specific issues of how a church and its members should think and therefore behave.
- c. Overarching Theme: Unity in the true gospel (whereas Corinth was exhibiting division from a misunderstanding of the gospel).

- i. Be unified

- 1. *"To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours." (1:2)*

- ii. Don't quarrel:

- 1. *"I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers." (1:10-11).*

- d. First Big Theme: There is a fundamental difference between a Christian and an unbeliever, and the difference is Christ in us.**

- i. Not about being smarter/more intellectual. Just the opposite.

- 1. *"For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." (1:17)*

- 2. *"For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God*

righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"(1:26-31)

- ii. Rather, the difference is that we have the Holy Spirit.
 - 1. *"Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by god."* (2:12)
- iii. The difference is so profound that those who do not have the Spirit, the world, may see Christianity and Christians as "fools."
 - 1. *"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of god, for they are folly to him and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."* (2:14)
- iv. Paul later makes the point that, if so, then we should happily be *"fools for Christ's sake."* (4:10)

e. Second Big Theme: How should this fundamental difference manifest itself in how we as believers behave and function within the church?

- i. Follow Christ, not worldly intellectualism.
 - 1. Understand the roles. We are all ultimately judge by God not man. From pastors all the way down. The Christian life is not about figuring out "who is the smartest." It is about imitating those who are following Christ well.
 - a. *"I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ as I teach them everywhere in every church."* (3:16-17)
 - 2. We should never get "too big for our britches" or start to depend on our own intelligence, apart from the gospel. Intellectual talk is cheap. God's truth is power.
 - a. *"Some are arrogant as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but*

their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?"
(4:18-21)

- ii. Become who we really are in Christ (pure, given Christ's sacrifice; unleavened), not what we used to be (impure; leavened).
 1. *"Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that I a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."* (5:6-8)
- iii. Be sexually pure.
 1. Not just "decline," or "avoid." "Flee" from it.
 - a. *"Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."* (6:18-20)
 2. Sex is intended by God to be had only within the marriage of a man and a woman.
 3. There is nothing wrong with singleness. In fact, it has advantages for the kingdom of God. Primarily, undivided focus on Christ.
 4. Divorce is bad.
- iv. Think strategically and considerately.
 1. Even though we have the Spirit within us, which gives us knowledge and freedom in knowing how to behave, we must make sure that we don't use that freedom in a manner

that will mislead those to whom we are ministering. Don't be a stumbling block.

- a. *"But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." (8:9)*
2. For example, Paul has put aside personal preferences or rights in order to strategically advance the gospel.
 - a. *"I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel . . . Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it." (9:22-24).*
- v. Flee from idolatry.
 1. *"[F]lee from idolatry." (10:14)*

f. Third big theme: Corporate worship should be orderly and properly intentioned.

- i. Communion: Don't be selfish or purposeless.
 1. The Corinthians were selfishly taking elements individually.
 2. The Corinthians were not examining themselves and coming to it with the right heart.
 3. Yes, all of those verses that we always focus on during Communion come from First Corinthians.
 - a. *"[T]he Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (11:24-26).*
- ii. Use the spiritual gifts God has given us *"for the common good,"* (12:7), not for our own good.

1. Using that as an example, Paul gives the well-known analogy of how the church of Christ should function as a human body--unified, with each member (eye, foot, hand, etc.) serving its own important part. Even though God has given members different gifts and has ordained different offices (elders, teachers, administrators, etc.), each member plays a critical role.
 - a. *“But as it is God arranged the members in the body, each one of them as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.”* (vv. 18-19)
- iii. Everything should be undergirded by love.
 1. Love defined and explained (Chapter 13--“The Love Chapter”)
 - a. *“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”* (13:4-8)
 2. Love commanded.
 - a. *“Pursue love.”* (14:1)
 3. Note: This is not an abstract concept read at a Biblical wedding. This was a critical element of what was lacking in the church in Corinth given its divisiveness, selfishness, and intellectual snobbery.
- iv. Church should not be chaos.
 1. *“For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.”* (v. 33)
 2. *“[A]ll things should be done decently and in order.”* (v. 40)

g. Fourth big theme: The resurrection of Christ was real and it is central to everything a Christian believes and does.

- i. Not: Longest passage in the Bible on the Resurrection.

- ii. Apparently some in Corinth were saying that there was no resurrection (v. 12).
- iii. Paul's response:
 - 1. It happened. (15:1-11)
 - 2. These intellectuals were preaching a futile faith if there was no resurrection. Resurrection is central to Christianity. (15:12-34).
 - a. *"If the dead are not raised, Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."* (15:32)
 - 3. Because of Chris's resurrection, we will one day be resurrected into an imperishable body. This gives us hope. (15:35-58)

8. Examples of Some Potentially Challenging Topics

- a. Divorce. (Ch. 7)
- b. "Head coverings" (11:1-16)
- c. "The role of women in the church." (Ch. 14)
- d. "Speaking in tongues." (Ch. 14)

9. Final Points/Selected Applications

10. Questions?