The Book of 1 Corinthians

by

Mike Willis
Cover Photo: The cover photo shows the remains of the Temple of Apollo that was a predominant feature of Hellenistic Corinth. It was erected in the sixth century B.C.
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For Additional Study

The author of this study manual has also written a commentary on the book of 1 Corinthians entitled *A Commentary on Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians*. It is published by the Guardian of Truth Foundation. There are a number of places in this manual where the student is directed to more detailed comments on a particular text in his commentary. Many students may want to supplement their study by reading the commentary.
The City of Corinth

The city of Corinth is located on the isthmus that bridges mainland Greece to the Peloponnese and separated the Saronic and Corinthian gulfs. Its geographical location secured for it an important and illustrious history. It controlled both the traffic between the two portions of Greece and the traffic between Italy and Asia. Many boats were pulled across the narrow isthmus rather than sailing 200-300 miles around lower Achaia. Later Nero began digging a canal across the isthmus at Corinth to connect the two gulfs. This engineering fete was finally accomplished in 1893.

Corinth was destroyed in B.C. 146 by Lucius Mummius because it was a leading city state rebelling against Roman rule. In 44 B.C. Julius Caesar rebuilt the city, establishing it as a Roman colony populated by freedmen from Rome. It soon grew into an important trading center. Like most important commercial cities, Corinth became a center for vice. Old Corinth was so wicked that the phrase “to Corinthize” (“to live like a Corinthian”) meant to live a life of drunken and immoral debauchery. Perhaps Paul’s description of Gentile degeneration, which appears in Romans 1:28-32, was inspired by what he saw at Corinth, for he wrote Romans from Corinth (see Rom. 15:26; 16:1). Old Corinth had 1000 prostitutes who plied their trade in the temple to Aphrodite. New Corinth soon grew into the same thriving commercial city as Old Corinth, complete with all of the vices of the former. Arthur Pencrhn Stanley described Corinth saying,

With the confluence of strangers and commerce, were associated the luxury and licentiousness which gave the name of Corinth an infamous notoriety, and which, connected as they were in the case of the Temple of Aphrodite with religious rites, sufficiently explain the denunciations of sensuality to which the Apostle gives utterance in these Epistles more frequently and elaborately than elsewhere (6).

The city of Corinth was the New York, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles of its day.

Paul’s Initial Work in Corinth

The book of Acts relates the work of the apostle Paul at Corinth. After Barnabas and Paul decided to go different directions on the second missionary journey, Paul and Silas commenced the second missionary journey; they were later joined by Timothy at Derbe and Lystra (Acts 15:36-16:5). Luke joined them in Troas (Acts 16:10). After receiving the Macedonian call at Troas, Luke, Paul, Timothy, and Silas sailed across the Aegean Sea to Neapolis. They traveled inland until they came to Philippi. There they converted Lydia, the Philippian jailer and others to establish the church there. After being released from jail, Paul and Silas departed from Philippi, leaving behind Timothy and Luke (see Acts 16:9-40). Leaving Philippi, they traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia to come to Thessalonica. For three sabbaths Paul taught in the synagogue at Thessalonica. Some were converted, including a great multitude of God-fearing Greeks and many of the chief women. The Jews were envious of Paul’s success and drove him out of the city. After Paul and Silas were sent away in the night, they went to Berea where they received a better hearing (Acts 17:1-11). Timothy rejoined Paul and Silas at Berea (Acts 17:14). Several were converted in Berea. Soon the Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea and stirred up the people against them. Paul left Berea by himself and came to Athens, leaving behind Silas and Timothy (Acts 17:10-15).

Paul preached in the synagogue and market place at Athens for a time. He delivered his well known sermon on Mars Hill. A few were converted (Acts 17:16-34). Leaving Athens, Paul came to Corinth.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he met Aquila and Priscilla, two Jewish Christians who had been forced to leave Rome because of the decree of Claudius (Acts 18:2). Because they and he were tent-makers, they worked together. He taught in the synagogue, persuading Jews and Greeks that Jesus was the Christ, until Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia bringing contributions (2 Cor. 11:9). When he pressed the Jews, they resisted his teaching. Paul and his group withdrew from the synagogue and
turned to the Gentiles. He worked in the house of Justus, a Jewish convert whose house adjoined the synagogue (Acts 18:7). He converted Crispus, a chief ruler of the synagogue, and many others (Acts 18:8). When opposition toward Paul intensified, the Lord spoke to him in a vision reassuring him that he had much people in the city and commanding him to continue his work. Paul continued working in Corinth and surrounding areas for eighteen months (Acts 18:11; cf. Rom. 16:1-2). During this time, he wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

When Julius Gallio was appointed governor of Achaia (A.D. 52-54, Conybeare and Howson 326), the Jews, under the leadership of Sosthenes, used the occasion of his appointment to make charges against Paul. They charged that “he persuadeth men to worship God contrary to the law” (Acts 18:13). Before Paul could speak his defense, Gallio dismissed the charges on the grounds that he was not interested in being involved in their religious controversies. The Greeks drove them from the judgment seat and beat Sosthenes, “and Gallio cared for none of these things” (Acts 18:17). After tarrying in Corinth for a good while, Paul departed for Ephesus.

Paul was the founder of the church at Corinth. He laid the foundation (1 Cor. 3:10). Like a father, he begat them in the gospel (1 Cor. 4:15).

Later Contact With Corinth
Aquila and Priscilla went to Ephesus with Paul (Acts 18:18). After Paul returned to Antioch of Syria, this Christian couple met Apollos, a very capable preacher who knew only the baptism of John. They taught him more perfectly the way of the Lord. Before Paul returned to Ephesus, Apollos moved to Corinth where he labored with the saints (Acts 18:26-28).

On his third missionary journey, Paul returned to Ephesus. He labored there for three years teaching, not only in Ephesus, but also in surrounding cities (Acts 19:10; 20:31). During these three years, Paul had several contacts with Corinth. Word of immorality in the church reached Paul. Paul made a short visit to Corinth during his work at Ephesus (Conybeare and Howson 375; this conclusion is based on these passages: 2 Cor. 2:1; 12:14, 21; 13:1-2). He also wrote a letter that is not extant in which he instructed the church not to keep company with immoral members (1 Cor. 5:9). Soon after this letter was sent, Paul intended to go to Macedonia and then to Achaia to raise a collection for the poor among the saints; he sent Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia and from there to Achaia to prepare these brethren for his arrival to collect their funds (Acts 19:21-22).

In the meantime, saints from the house of Chloe arrived in Ephesus reporting the problem of contentions in the church (1 Cor. 1:11). Soon afterwards, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus arrived in Ephesus with a letter from the church at Corinth asking Paul questions about certain problems (1 Cor. 16:17; 7:1). In response, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians which he sent by the hands of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus. He instructed the Corinthians to receive Timothy when he came (1 Cor. 4:17).

Several serious problems had developed at Corinth including the following as evidenced by 1 Corinthians: (a) Divisions (1-4); (b)
Immorality (5); (c) Brothers going to law with one another (6:1-8); (d) Fornication (6:12-20); (e) Marriage problems (7); (f) Problems relating to eating meats (8-10); (g) Insubordinate women (11:2-16); (h) Problems relating to the Lord’s supper (11:17-34); (i) Problems relating to spiritual gifts (12-14); (j) Some denied the resurrection (15). 1 Corinthians was written to address these problems.

Date and Authorship
Having given this background, we can make this certain conclusion about 1 Corinthians. The apostle Paul wrote the book of 1 Corinthians (1:1) from Ephesus (16:8). The approximate time of the writing of the book was the late spring — between Passover and Pentecost (based on his allusion to the Passover [1 Cor. 5:7] and his intention to stay at Ephesus until Pentecost [1 Cor. 16:8]) — of A.D. 55 or 56.

Outline of the Book
I. Greetings (1:1-3).
II. Thanksgiving (1:4-9).
III. The Problem of Factions (1:10-4:21).
A. Incest (5:1-13).
B. Litigations (6:1-11).
C. Fornication (6:12-20).
V. Questions Concerning Marriage (7:1-40).
VI. The Proper Use of Liberties (8:1-11:1).
A. The problems related to eating meats (8:1-13).
B. The apostle’s decision to waive his rights (9:1-23).
C. The peril of the strong (9:24-10:22).
D. Final statement of principles (10:23-11:1).
VII. Problems Relating to Worship (11:2-14:40).
A. Relative to the women’s covering (11:2-16).
B. Relative to the Lord’s supper (11:17-34).
C. Relative to spiritual gifts (12:1-14:40).
IX. The Collection for the Poor Saints in Jerusalem and Paul’s Planned Visit (16:1-9).
X. Concluding Remarks (16:10-24).

Questions
1. Locate Corinth on your map and compare its geographical location with Jerusalem, Rome, Philippi, Ephesus.

2. Why was Corinth’s location important to the growth of the city? ________________________________

3. What vices generally attend prosperous cities? _________________________________________________

4. What did the phrase “to live like a Corinthian” mean in ancient times? ______________________________

5. What does this tell you about the morals of the city? ____________________________________________

6. With whom did Paul work as tentmakers upon arriving in Corinth (Acts 18:1-2)? __________________

7. Why were they in Corinth (Acts 18:1-2)? ____________________________________________________

8. Where did Paul begin his preaching in Corinth (Acts 18:3-4)? ________________________________


10. Who were important early converts at Corinth (Acts 18:7-8)? ________________________________

11. How did the Corinthians become Christians (Acts 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:13-17; 6:9-10; 12:13)? ________________

Introduction: Paul’s Work at Corinth
12. What message did the angel deliver to Paul (Acts 18:9)?

_____________________________________________________________________________________

13. How much longer did he stay in Corinth (Acts 18:11)?

_____________________________________________________________________________________

14. Why did he leave the city (Acts 18:12-17)?

_____________________________________________________________________________________

15. Who traveled with him when he left for Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19)?

_____________________________________________________________________________________

16. Whom did this couple instruct more perfectly in Ephesus (Acts 18:24-28)?

_____________________________________________________________________________________

17. Where did this convert go when he left Ephesus (Acts 18:27)?

_____________________________________________________________________________________

18. What verses show that Paul had contact with Corinth after he left there?

_____________________________________________________________________________________

19. Who brought word of the conditions at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11; 16:17)?

_____________________________________________________________________________________

20. What was the condition of the church to which the book of 1 Corinthians was addressed?

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The Book of 1 Corinthians
Introduction (1:1-9)

1. Greetings (1:1-3). The introduction to Paul’s letter to the Corinthians follows the format of ancient letters (see Acts 15:23; 23:26). The letter was from Paul, although Sosthenes was present when he wrote the letter (1:1). Just who is Sosthenes is open to discussion. He is spoken of as though the Corinthians knew him. A Sosthenes is mentioned in Acts 18:17; he was the chief ruler of the synagogue who was beaten before the judgment seat of Gallio. If this is the Sosthenes mentioned, a significant conversion is implied; however, the name was a common one and he may not be the Sosthenes intended.

The letter is addressed to the church of God in Corinth (1:2). The church is called by a number of names, including church of Christ (Rom. 16:16), kingdom of God (Matt. 13:24), body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23), and house of God (1 Tim. 3:15-16). The phrase “church of God” may refer to Jesus as the deity intended by the reference to “God” (cf. Acts 20:28). The church is composed of those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus (1:2). Saints are living people, not those who have been dead for several centuries (as taught in Catholic dogma). The church is also composed of those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:12-13).

Paul sends God’s grace and peace to the Corinthians. This reminds us of the usual greetings of Greeks (charis) and Jews (shalom), although it is somewhat different to show the influence of the Christian doctrines of grace and peace.

2. Thanksgiving (1:4-9). Paul expresses his thanks for the Corinthians (1:4-9). However, the things for which he is thankful should be carefully noticed. He does not thank God for their moral growth and development, their good works, or other virtues that they have attained in Christ. Rather, he is thankful for God’s gifts to the Corinthians. They had been richly blessed with utterance and knowledge, miraculous spiritual gifts (1:5-7). They lacked none of the gifts necessary for their spiritual development; their gifts confirmed the testimony concerning Christ (1:6; cf. Mark 16:17-20).

In full possession of the gifts, they were to await the coming of the Lord (1:7). The coming of the Lord is the Christian’s hope. On that day, he will be found blameless because of the grace of God given to him in Jesus Christ (1:8). This is certain to occur because God is faithful (1:9). The assurance that saints would be confirmed in the day of the Lord no more implies the impossibility of apostasy than the call of 1:2 implied irresistible grace.

I. The Problem of Factions (1:10-4:21)

A. The Problem Described (1:10-17)

The division in the church at Corinth is described as one group saying they were of Paul, another of Cephas, another of Apollos and another of Christ (1:12). Their division is attributed to carnality (3:3) and thinking too highly of men (4:6). The division in the church is manifest in several other incidences mentioned in Corinth: (a) Brethren taking each other to law certainly would cause internal conflict (6:1-8); (b) The brethren were divided over eating meats sacrificed to idols (8-10); (c) The brethren were separated along class lines in eating a meal in association with the Lord’s supper (11:21); (d) Confusion reigned in the exercise of spiritual gifts (12-14). When one gathers this evidence, he can better evaluate the extent to which there were internal divisions among the Christians at Corinth.

The problem discussed in chapters 1-4, however, is attributable, not to conflict between Peter, Apollos, Paul, and Christ. These brethren were united. The problem was with the saints at Corinth. The explanation that best explains the situation in Corinth is to understand that the Corinthian Christians looked upon their preachers in the same light as they formerly viewed itinerant philosophers. They viewed the preachers as bringing their own personal wisdom (sophia); they were more concerned with polished oration than with significant content. Allegiance focused on the preacher rather than the Christ. To correct this problem, Paul had to show them the significant difference between human wisdom and divine revelation and the proper relationship of preachers to one another.
He begins by exhorting the Corinthians to be united. Theirs was to be a doctrinal unity (speak the same thing) based on having the same mind and having reached the same judgment (1:10). Everyone must first agree to have the “same mind” (a reference to the “mind of Christ,” divine revelation, see 2:16). If everyone agrees to abide in the revelation of God, they can reach the “same judgment” (the Bible does not teach conflicting doctrines), and “speak the same thing.” He makes no appeal for a unity-in-diversity. He does not say, “We can no more think alike than we can look alike.” Rather, he appeals for them to be one.

Paul relates that he had learned of their divisions from the house of Chloe (1:10). This must have been a family from Corinth who came to Ephesus and related the situation to Paul. The division was described as groups saying, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. To emphasize the sinfulness of their division, Paul replied that one should call himself after the name of him who had been crucified for him and into whose name he was baptized (1:13). Division is not to be tolerated; it is sinful.

Because of the faction some were forming around his name, Paul expressed his thankfulness that he had not personally baptized any at Corinth except Crispus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanus (1:14-16). Christ did not send him to baptize, but to preach the gospel (1:17).

B. The Gospel is the Wisdom of God (1:18-2:16)

This begins an extended argument to demonstrate the difference between the wisdom of men and the revealed will of God. Paul uses these arguments to prove that the gospel is not a human philosophy: (1) The gospel’s message is contrary to the wisdom of men (1:18-25); (2) The gospel’s appeal to the common man shows that it is not human philosophy (1:26-31); (3) The manner in which the gospel is preached shows that it is not a human philosophy (2:1-5); (4) The gospel is the wisdom of God (2:6-16).

1. The gospel’s message is contrary to the wisdom of men (1:18-25). That the gospel is not a human philosophy is shown by the fact that it does not appeal to the wisdom of either the Jews or the Greeks. Though lost men disdain its message as foolishness, the gospel is truly the power of God (1:18; cf. Rom. 1:16). Using a quotation from Isaiah 29:14, Paul emphasizes that God’s ways are superior to man’s ways (1:19). Paul asks, “Where is the wise? Where is the scribe?” (1:20). This and later discussion show that the church at Corinth was composed largely of common people; not many of this world’s elite were Christians. God made foolish the wisdom of this world is a comment about God’s destroying the wisdom of this world. The sages of human wisdom devise plans that frequently lead to self-destruction.

In the wisdom of God, God so ordered things that the world could not know him through human wisdom (1:21). Man cannot learn of God by human searching; he is dependent upon God’s revealing himself to man. Therefore, it pleased God to save men through the foolishness of preaching (that which is foolish is not the act of preaching, but the content of preaching). It is “foolish” from man’s point of view, not God’s. The Jews were seeking for a sign (a miracle of divine confirmation), and the Greeks were searching for wisdom. The simple message of salvation through a crucified Savior was offensive to both (1:23). But, to those who believe this message of God’s grace, the gospel is the wisdom and power of God (1:24). The foolishness of God (the gospel, so called because this is man’s evaluation) is wiser than men; the weakness of God (the gospel) is stronger than men.

2. The gospel’s appeal to the common man shows that it is not human philosophy (1:26-31). Those to whom the gospel appeals also demonstrates that it is not a human philosophy. When one

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1 To demonstrate how this unity is to be attained, follow the example of baptism. Every person agrees to abide in what the Bible teaches the action of baptism to be; the Scriptures use a word (baptizo) that means to “immerse.” Therefore, we can all agree that Bible baptism is an immersion in water. Even those who teach that sprinkling and pouring are acceptable substitutes for immersion agree that Bible baptism is an immersion in water.

2 This passage becomes a strong argument about the purpose of water baptism. One cannot wear the name of Christ unless Christ was crucified for him and he was baptized into his name. Hence, to be “of Christ” one must be baptized.

3 This passage contains one of the “not-but” constructions designed to give emphasis to the last half of the construction without denying the first half. For comparisons of this construction, see John 6:27; Matthew 6:19-20; etc. The contrast is between preaching the gospel and the act of baptizing. That Christ authorized him to baptize is seen in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16).
considers who obeys the call of the gospel, he sees that not many wise men, mighty men, and noble are called. Rather the gospel appeals to the weak, base, despised, and things which are not. God has chosen these to confound the wise and to eliminate any trust in human accomplishment (that no flesh should glory in his presence). Jesus is our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1:30). Therefore, man has no room for self-glory. “He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord” (1:31).

Questions
1. What is an apostle? _______________________________________________________________________
2. Why is Paul’s reference to himself as an apostle significant? _______________________________________________________________________
3. From Acts 18:17 what can you learn about Sosthenes (1:1)? _______________________________________________________________________
4. What are some scriptural terms by which to refer to the church? _______________________________________________________________________
5. What idea is conveyed by designating Christians as “saints” (1:2)? _______________________________________________________________________
6. For what did Paul give thanks about the Corinthians (1:4-9)? _______________________________________________________________________
7. What purpose did spiritual gifts serve (see 1:6; cf. Mark 16:17-20)? _______________________________________________________________________
8. What things must be done in order to have unity, according to 1:10? _______________________________________________________________________
9. Give two examples of how the principles in 1:10 can lead to Bible unity. _______________________________________________________________________
10. What two things had to occur before one could wear the name of a person (1:12-13)? _______________________________________________________________________
11. List as many similarities between the divisions in modern denominationalism and the Corinthian problem as you can. _______________________________________________________________________
12. Why did Paul thank God he had not baptized any more than he listed (1:16-17)? _______________________________________________________________________
13. In what sense is the preaching of the cross foolishness (1:18)? _______________________________________________________________________

Chapter 1: The Problem of Factionalism (1)
14. In what sense is the gospel the power of God (1:18; cf. Rom. 1:16)? 

_______________________________________________________________________________________

15. Give some examples of how God shows the wisdom of men to be foolishness (1:19). 

_______________________________________________________________________________________

16. Why would God decide to so order things that man cannot find God through his own wisdom (1:21)? 

_______________________________________________________________________________________

17. How is man saved through preaching (1:21)? 

_______________________________________________________________________________________

18. Why was the gospel rejected by the Jews (1:22)? 

_______________________________________________________________________________________

19. Why was the gospel rejected by the Greeks (1:22)? 

_______________________________________________________________________________________

20. Why does Paul wish the Corinthians to remember that the majority of their members were common men (1:26)? 

_______________________________________________________________________________________

21. How does the gospel eliminate human pride (1:31)? 

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A small portion of the Lychaeum Road in Ancient Corinth.