

## **FIRST CORINTHIANS**

### **Introduction Acts 18:1-11**

Imagine a church wracked by divisions. Powerful leaders promote themselves against each other, each with his band of loyal followers. One of them is having an affair with his stepmother, and, instead of disciplining him, many in the church boast of his freedom in Christ to behave in such a way. Christians sue each other in secular courts; some like to visit prostitutes. As a backlash against this rampant immorality, another faction in the church is promoting celibacy -- complete sexual abstinence for all believers (married or unmarried) -- as the Christian ideal. Still other debates rage about how decisively new Christians should break from their past disagreements, about men's and women's roles in the church add to the confusion. As if all this were not enough, alleged prophecies and speaking in tongues occur regularly, but not always in constructive fashion. A significant number of these immature Christians do not even believe in the future bodily resurrection of Christians. This was the church at Corinth and it sounds like many of the churches in America in 1996.

How many times have you heard people say, "I don't think the Bible is relevant for the twentieth century? It just doesn't speak to our intellectual, technological, progressive world!"

Well, that may be true if a person is reading in the books of First and Second Chronicles, but it is not true if he is reading in the book of First Corinthians. This book is up-to-date; it is contemporary; it is relevant. In fact, most of the problems the Corinthians were dealing with in the first century we are dealing with today. Satan's devices and human nature do not change. In First Corinthians we find subjects dealt with such as the exaltation of human wisdom (philosophy), the exaltation of man (humanism), divisions in the local church, sexual immorality, insubordination to authority, marriage, divorce, the single state, the relationship of male to female (first century feminism) questionable practices such as drinking wine, the place of women in the church, gay rights and the true meaning of love. The book of First Corinthians has the answers to the basic moral problems facing our society today.

"I believe that the church in our generation needs to rediscover the apostolic Gospel; and for this it needs the Epistle to the Romans. It needs also to rediscover the relation between this Gospel and its order, discipline, worship and ethics; and for this it needs the 1st Epistle to the Corinthians. If it makes these discoveries, it may well find itself broken. ." (C.K. Barrett, First Corinthians).

Introductions can at times get tedious, but they are essential if we are going to get the true meaning of this book. Trying to cover a book of the Bible without an introduction is like coming into the middle of a movie and trying to figure out the plot.

The ultimate goal of a study of First Corinthians is to understand the text and see how it applies to our present day culture in America. We must not only feel this book with our hearts but we must understand it with our heads. We must use our minds so the truth can filter to our hearts.

There was a very wealthy businessman who found out from his brain surgeon that he was going to need a brain transplant. He asked the doctor what brains were available and how much it would cost. The doctor said there is a college professor's brain and the cost would be thirty thousand dollars. "What else is available?," replied the man. "Well," said the doctor, "there is a brain of a rocket scientist and the price would be three hundred thousand dollars." "What else?" The doctor replied, "We do have a special deal on the brain of a politician. The price is three million dollars." "What, three million. Why is it so expensive, Doc?" The doctor calmly replied, "It has never been used before!" Maybe you are one of those Christians who has never used your brain before to really understand scripture. I am going to ask you to think through the Book of First Corinthians with me for the next forty weeks.

#### AUTHOR

No one in history has ever seriously questioned that Paul was the writer of First Corinthians. He wrote the book from Ephesus "But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, " (I Cor. 16:8), at the very height of his ministry in that city.

#### DATE

Scholars disagree, but it was written sometime between A.D. 53-57, probably more like A.D. 55.

#### CITY OF CORINTH

Historically. Corinth was declared a free city by Rome in 196 B.C. In 146 B.C. it rebelled and was totally destroyed by the Romans. In 46 B.C. Julius Caesar rebuilt the city in great elegance, restoring it to its former prominence, making it a Roman colony.

Commercially. In the time of the Apostle Paul, Corinth was the most important city in Greece. It was a wealthy metropolis of seven hundred thousand people, and was located on a narrow isthmus, dividing the Adriatic and Aegean seas. It was a powerful commercial center for the Roman Empire with two major seaports - Lachaem and Cenchreae. There was no city in the whole Mediterranean which had more commerce and trade. It attracted all kinds of people from all over the Roman Empire.

Politically. Corinth was the capital of Achaia, a Roman colony, and the seat of the proconsul. It was a vital military center, commanding the trade routes of Greece.

Culturally. Corinth prided itself on its culture. It abounded in studios and workshops, hall of rhetoric, schools of business and philosophy. There was a large amphitheatre seating eighteen thousand and a concert hall seating three thousand. The famous Isthmian Games were celebrated nearby, and the city attracted some of the finest athletes in the Roman world. Half of the population were slaves and the other half were free men. The people of Corinth prided themselves on their intellectualism, although it had degenerated into a crude, shallow type. People of all races, backgrounds and social strata came to this city, and the Greeks delighted in nothing more than a healthy, even argumentative, philosophical, political or religious argument. They were a fiercely independent people and very proud of their knowledge. In fact, they thought they knew everything. It was truly a cosmopolitan city. Jews and Orientals came to trade. Romans were there on official business and the commerce brought sailors, salesmen, bankers, and people from every corner of the Mediterranean world.

Spiritually. With pride in the intellect and great wealth comes a poverty of spiritual values. Corinth was one of the most wicked cities of its time, perhaps of all time. Two vices plagued this city: greed for material things and lusts of passion. Corinth was luxurious and immoral. It was a "boom town" and its rapid growth in wealth produced a false, licentious culture. It was a beautiful city, but it was also a city of prostitution and passion. Its religion was the worship of the goddess of sex; and the people worshiped Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Corinth was built at the base of a huge 1,850 foot rock called the Acrocorinth, and right at the very top of the Acrocorinth was the Temple of Aphrodite. Every evening thousands of priests and priestesses -- male and female prostitutes - would come down from the temple into the streets to ply their trade. Besides those who served in the temple, there were others who were high class prostitutes, cultured in the arts, music, and the ways of the world; they were notorious throughout the Roman Empire. This Aphrodite cult was dedicated to the glorification of sex. Sexual immorality, therefore was part of the religion of Corinth, and all the respectable people in the city, if they were religious, would involve themselves in sexual immorality. There was also another religious cult directed towards males. Inside the city was the Temple of Apollo who was the god of music, song and poetry, but most of all he was the ideal male beauty. Nude statues and pictures of Apollo in various poses of virility, having homosexual relations with the boy gods, stimulated his male worshipers to physical displays of devotion and passion with the same sex. Corinth, therefore, was the center of homosexual activity.

It became common to portray Corinthians on the theater stage as hopeless drunkards. A "Corinthian banquet" was an orgy. A "Corinthian drinker" was an alcoholic. A "Corinthian life" meant a life of luxury and sexual vice. A "Corinthian girl" meant a loose and immoral woman. In those days there was "Corinthian sickness" which was the inevitable physiological and psychological results of living a debauched life (depression due to sin).

Corinth could be compared to today's cities like San Francisco, Las Vegas, Hollywood or New York. Corinth was a city as bad or worse than any city in our world. It was the cesspool of the Roman Empire, but the gospel of Christ penetrated that city and many turned to God from their wickedness to serve the living Christ.

## CHURCH AT CORINTH

The Apostle Paul came to Corinth all alone to preach the gospel of Christ to this wicked city. A few weeks earlier he had been horribly persecuted in Macedonia. He had just left Athens where he and his message were rejected by the intellectual Athenians. He arrived in Corinth, a brash, opulent and arrogant city, without companions, without money and without friends, and no doubt his heart was burdened at the sight of all the godlessness, immorality and vice. Paul was recovering from being physically battered. He was emotionally drained and spiritually down. Yet, God sent him to the least likely place to lift his spirits. God's ways are not our ways and He had special plans for Paul. We are told that Paul came into the city with real fear and great weakness. "I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling" (I Cor. 2:3). Being true to his divine calling, he preached the basic message of Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection, to save sinful people. "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2).

Gradually some people began to respond to Jesus Christ. Although there was a fairly large Jewish population in the city, Paul had very little fruit among the Jews. He left preaching to the Jews and preached almost entirely to the Gentiles.

"When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles'" (Acts 18:5-6).

A few of the high society people were saved in Corinth but most came from the lower classes. A few prominent people did respond to Christ: Justus, a wealthy proselyte to Judaism (Acts 18:7), Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue (Acts 18:8), Erastus, treasurer of the city of Corinth (Rom. 16:23), Gaius, a wealthy man with a large home (Rom. 16:23) and Chloe, a wealthy woman with a household of slaves (I Cor. 1:11). There were some from the higher echelons of society and with political influence, but the vast majority of the converts at Corinth were from the lower strata of society. Some were even slaves.

"Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (I Cor. 1:26-27).

Furthermore, some of these Corinthians had been saved out of a horrible, sinful life.

"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (I Cor. 6:9-11).

The gospel came to this immoral city where the people were outwardly appearing to be happy--philosophically alert, materially prosperous, and sexually free--but they were miserable and in desperate need of forgiveness. This was the makeup of the Corinthian Church. These people had come out of sordid backgrounds. Many of them perhaps were still struggling with much of the aftermath in their lives of these evil things. They carried a lot of unsaved baggage into their new Christian experience.

The city of Corinth was God's target for the gospel. When Paul started to have some success, the devil became active and things began to heat up. The thought of more spiritual conflict and physical persecution caused Paul much internal anguish. Under Satanic attack, ministry pressures and spiritual depression, Paul wanted to flee Corinth. Christ appeared to Paul and told him to get back into the city because He had many people He wanted to save and Paul was to be Christ's instrument. Then one of the greatest statements is made to Paul about God's sovereignty in salvation.

"One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: 'Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent for I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.'" (Acts 18:9-10).

Paul stayed a year and a half at Corinth, preaching and teaching, and then he moved on to another city to declare Christ. It must have been heartbreaking and a little scary for Paul to leave his converts to Christ in that evil city, but he had to be obedient to his Lord; and also he had great confidence that a sovereign Lord would take care of the local church at Corinth and that it could survive without him.

#### LETTERS TO THE CHURCH AT CORINTH

Paul continued his contact with the infant Corinthian Church from Ephesus. He wrote a letter to the Corinthians and part of its contents was telling the Christians that they should not associate with immoral people. "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people..." (I Cor. 5:9). This was misunderstood by them because they thought they should stop witnessing to the sinful world around them, becoming hyper-separationists. If they had to stop associating with sinful people in Corinth, this would be everybody! This letter has been lost and we have no record of it. This is sometimes called "the previous letter."

Technically First Corinthians is Second Corinthians. Obviously the first letter was not inspired and had no use for the universal church throughout the age of the church.

“Why was this letter not preserved? Presumably it did not have sufficient instruction on enough topics of abiding significance to be sufficiently valuable to the broader Christian community. We must remember that the biblical writers were inspired only when they wrote what now forms Scripture and not in everything they ever spoke or wrote” (Craig Blomberg, First Corinthians).

Then Paul got wind of some real problems developing in the church of Corinth, and he sat down to write them First Corinthians in order to handle the problems. The letter did not solve the problems at the church. In fact, it intensified them. As a result, Paul made a brief visit to Corinth from Ephesus “So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you” (II Cor. 2:1). This was a very painful visit because he had to come wielding his authority as an apostle, rebuking the church severely for their behavior. Apparently the basic problem was a refusal to accept the authority of the Apostle Paul.

Paul returned to Ephesus from Corinth, and when he arrived, he heard that his visit was ineffectual. They began to question his authority and judgment even more. So Paul sat down to write a third letter to the Corinthians. “For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you” (II Cor. 2:4). This was a scorcher of a letter which apparently was needed to shake these carnal Corinthians to reality. Apparently Titus carried a letter back to Paul that the Corinthians had written him. Paul, a true shepherd, was so concerned about what effect his letter had on the Corinthians; he left Ephesus and met Titus halfway. Titus had good news. The Corinthians were ready to receive Paul’s apostleship and leadership. Things has been set straight. Then Paul wrote Second Corinthians which was really the third of fourth epistle to the Corinthians. Second Corinthians is a letter of thanksgiving and great relief. Then sometime later Paul visited the Corinthians again.

#### REASONS FOR WRITING TO THE CHURCH AT CORINTH

First, while in Ephesus, Paul received a report from the household of Chloe that there was great division, strife and dissension among the Corinthian Christians. “My brothers, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you” (I Cor. 1:11). Second, a delegation of three distinguished members of the church crossed the sea to bring a letter to Paul from the church at Corinth asking for answers to certain practical problems that had arisen in that assembly. “I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you” (I Cor. 16:17).

## PURPOSES FOR WRITING TO THE CHURCH AT CORINTH

First, Paul writes to deal with the disorders reported from members of the household of Chloe. Paul, in chapters 1-6, sets right the contentions that had arisen in that assembly of believers. In chapters one and two, he deals with divisions brought about because of a conflict between human wisdom and God's wisdom in living the Christian life. In chapters three and four, he deals with the problem of following men rather than Christ in the local church. In chapter five, he deals with the problem of refusing to deal with sexual sin in the local assembly because sin was being tolerated. In chapter six, Paul deals with the problem of Christians who were at odds with one another, so much so that they were going to pagan law courts to solve their problems.

Second, Paul writes to deal with the difficulties of running a local church which the Corinthians asked him about. "Now for the matters you wrote about" (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12). This formula occurs six times. In chapter seven Paul deals with marriage, divorce and the single state. In chapter eight, Christian liberty. In chapter nine, vindication of Paul's authority in the church and paying of a pastor. In chapter ten, religious apostasy. In chapter eleven, attitudes at the Lord's Table and place of women in the church. In chapters twelve and fourteen, spiritual gifts, and in chapter sixteen, the collection for the needy saints in Jerusalem and the acceptance of Apollos. Sandwiched right in the middle of spiritual gifts is chapter thirteen, the greatest chapter in the Bible on love.

Third, Paul writes to deal with a doctrine denied or questioned by some in the Corinthian Church. Some were denying that there would be a general resurrection of all true believers in Christ. "But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" (I Cor. 15:12).

## VALUE FOR TWENTIETH CENTURY CHRISTIANS FROM THE FIRST LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT CORINTH

First, this book best reflects American culture and how that culture affects the evangelical church.

A final word needs to be said about the considerable importance of this letter to today's church. The cosmopolitan character of the city and church, the strident individualism that emerges in so many of their behavioral aberrations, the arrogance that attends their understanding of spirituality, the accommodation of the gospel to the surrounding culture in so many ways—these and many other features of the Corinthian church are but mirrors held up before the church today" (Gordon Fee, First Corinthians).

Second, this book presents to us the life of the primitive, New Testament local church better than any book in the Bible. No other book sheds more light on the organization and functioning of the local church. As we go through this book, we should ask ourselves if our church is trying to operate and function as a New Testament church. I know there is lots of

room for disagreement as to what a New Testament church is; and we can never exactly reproduce such a church, but some of the basic things are: sound doctrine, rule by elders, equipping of the saints for ministry, the discovery and use of spiritual gifts, an effective evangelistic outreach to the lost world, commitment to love, care for and minister to our brothers and sisters in Christ and a proper use of church discipline to maintain the purity of the church.

Third, this book is a paradigm (example, pattern) for urban ministry. If Christ can change lives in the most populated, most wealthy, most commercially-minded and most sex-obsessed city in ancient Eastern Europe, He can surely save and change lives anywhere in the world today.

Fourth, this book is an exhortation to godly living. The Corinthian church was not primarily guilty of heresy but was carnal (worldly, fleshly) in its approach to Christian living and how to run a local church. After Paul left them, these believers, most of whom did not have much understanding of spiritual realities, slipped back into some of their old ways. Greek philosophy and eloquence was a constant threat to them. The pollution of morals in Corinth was a continual temptation. Most of these believers failed to go on in the things of Christ and were retrogressing in their Christian experience. They were going back to some of their attitudes and actions they had before they were converted to Christ. The Corinthian church had to be in the world, but in Corinth the world was in the church and this should never be. This makes First Corinthians very relevant for us today because the sins of our culture have also become the sins of our local churches: pragmatism, materialism, rationalism, humanism, situational ethics, sexual perversion, abortion, racial prejudice, exaltation of men, toleration of sin, rebellion to authority, divorce and a hundred other vices.

The theme of First Corinthians is "sanctification" or "godly living" which manifests itself in a practical lifestyle. This book teaches us that Christian living is a constant acknowledgment of Christ's lordship over our lives. Romans and Galatians make it plain that one is not saved by obedience to the law. First Corinthians makes it equally plain that the saved are expected to live out their lives in obedience to the commands of God (7:19) and the law of Christ (9:2 1).

"Polls repeatedly claim that upwards of eighty percent of Americans claim to be Christian and that between thirty to forty percent claim to have had a "born again" experience, yet there is little evidence of many of the fruits of genuine conversions or of the practice of true spirituality. Instead we see much behavior that closely parallels the immorality and 'I demand my rights' attitude that so characterized Corinth" (Blomberg).

Fifth, this book attests to the power of the gospel to change lives. Christ can take a debased sinner and make him or her into a saint. Christ can reach any man or woman, no matter what their educational, racial, social or moral condition and turn them into new creatures in Christ. Christ changes lives through the power of the gospel.

Once H.A. Ironside was preaching in a place when he noticed a man writing on a little card. The man turned out to be Arthur Lewis who was an agnostic lecturer. Lewis gave Ironside the card which was a challenge to have a public debate over Christianity versus agnosticism. Ironside read the card publicly and said he would accept the challenge under two conditions: "First," he said, "You, Mr. Lewis,

must promise to bring to the debate platform one man who was once an outcast, a slave to sinful habits, who heard you or some other infidel lecturer on agnosticism and was helped by it to cast away his sins, becoming a new man, and who today is a respected member of society because of unbelief. My second condition is that you are also to bring one woman to the platform who was lost to all purity and goodness but who now can testify that agnosticism came to her while in deep sin and implanted within her heart a hatred of impurity and a love of holiness, causing her to be chaste and upright all through her disbelief in the Bible. Now if you agree to these conditions, I promise to be there with one hundred such men and women who were once lost souls who have responded to the gospel of Christ and have found new life and joy in Jesus Christ. Will you accept the terms? The man stood up, head bowed, and silently walked out.

## CONCLUSION

What is the gospel? Christ the God-Man died for sinful men and women and rose from the dead to prove He was God and to give them eternal life. Because of His death and resurrection, He offers salvation to any man or woman, boy or girl, on the basis that a person will receive by faith that Christ died for him or her and then bow before Christ as Lord, giving Him the right to rule in their life.

Christ changes lives! Christ saves the vilest person! Christ gives people hope for eternity! Have you made a mess of your life like the Corinthians? Jesus says to you, "I came to save sinners, not the righteous!"

