

Kew Baptist  
CHURCH

# 1 CORINTHIANS

Becoming a **Jesus-centred** Community

“FOR I RESOLVED TO KNOW NOTHING WHILE I WAS WITH YOU EXCEPT **JESUS CHRIST** AND HIM CRUCIFIED.” 1 COR 2:2.

## Study Guide

*Paul’s first letter to Corinth—a lively seaport where people and cultures of every sort jostled together, just like so many places in today’s world—is full of wisdom and challenge. The young church there was as lively as the place itself, with as many questions and problems—and as much joy and excitement—as any growing church today. Paul’s pastoral sensitivity and deep insight come together to make this letter one of his crowning achievements, full of good things for us to ponder and enjoy today.*

Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians*



Main Market Street in Corinth



City Baths in Corinth

## Corinth: the City and its Culture

Corinth was a wild city in many ways, The city itself had two harbours and was situated upon the isthmus which connected the Peloponnese with mainland Greece. The two ports of Lechaem and Cenchreae, and the favourable geographical location, ensured lucrative trade for the city. Corinth also hosted the Isthmian Games and only the Olympic games held more importance.

The city flourished through the favourable years of Athens as a Greek city-state around the 5thc. B.C.E. However, through conflict with Rome, Corinth was completely destroyed in 146 B.C.E. The city lay dormant for one century and was refounded as a Roman colony in 44 B.C.E. by Julius Caesar.

The city soon prospered once more and was an important financial centre.

The extent of the vice in Ancient Corinth was renowned, but its reputation was larger than the reality. This has been noted in the embellished account of 'a thousand temple prostitutes', by the ancient Greek writer, Strabo. Reputations do have a trace of truth in them, however, the city most likely was no worse than any other wealthy seaport city.

The religious environment portrayed the usual Pantheon of gods associated with Graeco-Roman culture, as well as religious practices imported from Egypt. Archaeological discoveries have unearthed the record of many statues and idols to the various gods. It is likely that a Jewish community was within the city also.

It was within this environment that Paul founded a Christian community through the proclamation of the gospel. Acts 18:11 informs us that Paul stayed in Corinth for 18 months 'teaching them the word of God'. The duration of his stay was most likely from the spring of 50 C.E., to the summer of 51 C.E. Commenting on reasons why Paul chose Corinth as a base for mission, Jerome Murphy O'Connor states, "Corinth was open to new ideas in a way that traditional cities were not. If Christianity could be implanted in such a hostile environment, it would be evidence of its intrinsic power to change the world."

Hans Dieter Betz and Margaret Mitchell, state concerning the Pauline mission in Corinth,

*In Corinth the Pauline mission had succeeded - seemingly for the first time - in winning converts from the better-educated and cultured circles of a prosperous and cosmopolitan city. The congregation had access to material as well as spiritual wealth, both proverbial assets of the city of Corinth. From the scarce evidence available to us we can infer that the church was diverse in its make-up.*

*There were in it sharp distinctions socially, intellectually, and probably ethnically.*

Such a description sounds very much like the churches of today. The diversity that is reflected in the contemporary church is mirrored in the earliest Christian communities. We do not see a prototype or a template for the church in the NT.

Just like our churches today, the community which was planted in Corinth consisted of a 'mixed-bag' of members. Through the names mentioned in the correspondence, we can ascertain that there were Jews, Romans, Greeks, slaves, freedmen, wealthy, and poor.

Gordon Fee commenting on the situation of the community at the time of Paul writing 1 Corinthians, states:

*...the picture that emerges is one of a predominantly Gentile community, the majority of whom were at the lower end of the socio-economic ladder, although there were two or three wealthy families. As former pagans they brought to the Christian faith a Hellenistic worldview and attitude toward ethical behaviour. Although they were the Christian church in Corinth, an inordinate amount of Corinth was yet in them emerging in a number of attitudes and behaviours that required radical surgery without killing the patient.*

Paul was very concerned for the welfare of his churches. Sometimes his words reflect those of a parent's concern of a child:

*My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you! (Gal 4:19-20)*

In 1 Corinthians Paul actually refers to himself as the father of the community:

*I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. (4:14-15)*

The passionate concern and love that Paul had for the church has been a great model and example to Christians throughout all generations. But it is only a tiny fraction of the concern that God has for His people, and as we prayerfully engage with this letter, may we hear the heart of God poured out for us in Christ.





Reconstruction of 1st Century Corinth



Remains of one of many Pagan temples in the city

## Paul and his Letters

When we look in the NT for biographical information about Paul we find two main sources: The book of Acts and the Letters Paul himself wrote. While the information in Acts is helpful, Paul's own writings are the primary source we must mine for information about his person and life.

There are 13 letters in the NT attributed to Paul:

Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon.

So who was Paul? Where did he come from? How did he become the most prominent figure, apart from Jesus, in the history of the Christian Church?

## Paul the Persecutor

Luke moves Paul to centre screen at the stoning of Stephen (Ac 7:58; 8:1). Paul is shown as giving his approval to the murder of Stephen. Thus Paul was an antagonist of the early church "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples", to use Luke's words (Ac 9:1).

Up until this point Luke has named Paul, Saul. It was not uncommon for a Jewish person of the time to have two names. One was their Jewish name, in this case, Saul, and the other was a Roman name, in this case, Paul. In his letters Paul never refers to himself as Saul. The name change in Acts may also serve to highlight symbolically the change of nature Saul underwent through his conversion from enemy of the gospel to a passionate proclaimer of the gospel.

Paul himself admits to intensely persecuting and trying to destroy the church of God:

*"You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it."* (Gal 1:13)

*For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."* (1 Cor 15:9)

*"...as to zeal, a persecutor of the church;"* (Phil 3:6a)

Form such a place of hostility and bigotry, Paul's calling and commissioning by God to proclaim the gospel was a profound and powerful event for him.

## Paul the Jew

This leads us into looking at Paul the Jew. As with most of the early followers of Jesus, Paul was Jewish. He says this himself:

*“I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.”* (Rom 11:1b)

Paul’s Jewish name, Saul is connected to belonging to the tribe of Benjamin for Israel’s first King, Saul, was from the Benjamin clan (cf. 1 Sam 9:1-3).

Paul was by no means a nominal Jew who just went to church on Saturday. No, he was an extremely zealous Jew advancing in Judaism beyond many of his peers:

*“I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.”* (Gal 1:14)

Paul was also a member of the Pharisees who were a sect within Judaism like the Essenes and Saducees:

*“If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;”* (Phil 3:4b-5)

While we do not know a lot from antiquity about the Pharisees, but there were tensions between the Pharisees and Jesus and his followers. But from what we do know about them is that they were zealous and devoted to the Law and upheld strict purity codes. Paul’s persecution of the early followers of Jesus may not have been because they were “Christian” ( a word which came later), but because, in his eyes, they were heretical Jews, for they were not as strict in their observance of Torah (God’s commands to Moses on Mt Sinai).

And yet the gospel reached Pharisees as well, even if there were ongoing tensions in the church about the role of the Law of Moses:

*Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”* (Acts 15:5)

## Paul the Antagonist

During his ministry, Paul would encounter opposition from within the church, itself. Because he had maintained that God had called him to preach to the Gentiles (non-Jews), he was persecuted for his stance on certain Jewish customs. This can be most clearly seen as coming to a head in the letter to the Galatians.

The central issue of the day for the early church was whether Gentile converts were required to uphold the law of Moses or not. A couple of major issues surfaced as significant: circumcision and dietary laws. Paul upheld that Gentile converts were not required to adhere to the Law of Moses which meant they did need to be circumcised or follow Jewish dietary laws. This put Paul into direct conflict with other prominent leaders of the church, namely James and Cephas, that is Peter. Paul recounts an incident in Galatians where he confronted Peter to his face over what Paul perceived to be his double standards. As the story unfolds, Peter had been eating at the same table as Gentiles. Under Jewish law this was forbidden. You may recall in the Gospels Jesus is questioned as to why he eats with tax collectors and 'sinners' (Mt 9:9-13). The following is Paul's account of what happened:

*But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Gal 2:11-14).*

In the end Paul won out over other Jewish Christians and the church eventually went away from its Jewish cradle and became a predominantly Gentile movement. It must be noted that Paul's siding with the Gentile converts was a momentous shift in his thinking and practice.

## Paul the Theologian

Because of the large distances Paul travelled he kept in touch with his new converts by way of emissaries and mail. The Roman Empire had a reasonably reliable postal system and letter writing was fairly common. Paul wrote in styles that are seen in other letters found from the same era. Just as we, today, have styles of letters and basic rules we follow, so too did Graeco-Roman society.



Thankfully for us, Paul wrote letters to his churches. By doing so he has bequeathed the church a theological legacy which has kept us busy and engaged for the last 1950 years. The breadth and depth of theological scholarship on Paul is almost parallel to the description given by John about the works of Jesus: “if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” (Jn 21:25)

Paul’s letters, however, had a more immediate focus than that of preserving his thought for subsequent generations. He was dealing with very real crises in his churches that needed to be hastily addressed. Paul did not have the luxury of taking time out to write and publish theological works for distribution around the Roman Empire. He had to deal with these problems, ‘on the run’, so to speak.

Because we may face similar problems as the early Christians of Paul’s churches, we can be addressed by the letters and have our assumptions about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, Church, worship, mission, etc, challenged and modified. What Paul wrote to his churches becomes alive and relevant to us as we immerse ourselves into the thought and theology of the great Theologian and apostle, Paul.

## Paul the Missionary

We must look at Paul the missionary, for this provides the background for looking at one of his letters to the Corinthians and why he wrote letters anyway.

Luke outlines some of Paul’s missionary journeys for us in Acts.

Paul travelled extensively in preaching his gospel. Paul was compelled to do so out of a calling and commissioning by God. Paul’s recount of his calling sounds very familiar to some of the callings of the OT prophets. Listen to what Paul says of his calling and then Jeremiah:

*“But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.”* (Gal 1:15-17)

*Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,  
“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”* (Jer 1:4-5)

Paul's calling to preach Christ among the Gentiles came to him from God. He travelled enormous distances over the then known world, a great deal of the time on foot. He did not travel alone but had various companions along the way such as Barnabus, John Mark, Timothy, Silvanus, to name but a few. He founded churches in Galatia (modern Turkey), Thessalonica, Corinth, and Philippi (modern Greece). Paul was certainly a man of action and passion and consequently he came into conflict with Jewish and Roman authorities along the way and Paul's resumé is quite impressive:

*I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? (2 Cor 11:23-29 NIV).*

Paul's devotion to Jesus changed the world. In his own day he appeared to many as a loser and as a fool. In the end, it was those who opposed and persecuted Paul for his preaching of the Good News of Jesus. For they were opposing God, not Paul. The message of Jesus is just as relevant and true but as we head toward the end of the Age, it is more urgent than ever that we apply ourselves to live it and share it.

As we listen to God by His Holy Spirit through 1 Corinthians, may we also be people who change our world for Christ; one heart and life at a time.

**Sources Cited:**

Hans Dieter Betz and Margaret M. Mitchell, in D.N Freedman et al (eds.) The Anchor Bible Dictionary. Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans. 1987.  
J. Murphy-O'Connor, *The Theology of The Second Letter to The Corinthians*. (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1991).



Pavement stone found near the theater in Corinth; the inscription indicates that Erastus the Aedile paid for the pavement out of his own funds

*Could the Erastus of Romans 16 and of the inscriptions be the same person? The short answer is yes. There is evidence that Greek oikonomos and agoranomos could both refer to the same office in a Roman colony—both as translations of Latin aedilis. In view of his possession of such an office, the possibility that the Erastus mentioned in Romans 16 is not the same as the Erastus of the inscriptions seems slight. Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth**



Temple Ruins in Corinth

Week 1: Corinth: A Divided Church in a 1<sup>st</sup> Century Las Vegas (1:1-17)

Week 2 : God's 'Dumb' and 'Weak' Plan to Save us. (1:18-2:16)

**Week 3: The Church that God is Building (3:1-23)**

**Week 4: The Leadership that God Blesses (4:1-21)**



**Week 5: Incest, Litigation and Prostitutes: The Church at Corinth**

**Week 6: Marriage, Sex and Singleness Part 1 (7:1-16)**

Week 7: Marriage, Sex and Singleness Part 2 (17-40)

Week 8: Love and Freedom in Tension (8:1 -9:27)

Week 9: Living in the Culture, but not like the Culture (10:1 – 11:1)

Week 10: Gender Wars in the 1st Century (11:2-16)

**Wk 11: Sharing the Lord's Supper; Loving the Lord's People (11:17-34)**

**Week 12: Spiritual Gifts and Spiritual People (12:1-31)**

**Week 13: Love: The Greatest of Gifts (13:1-13)**

**Week 14: Spiritual Gifts in Action Part 1 (14:1-25)**



Week 15: Spiritual Gifts in Action Part 2 (14:26-40)

Week 16: Everything Rises or Falls on Jesus' Resurrection (15 & 16)

ACTS: CORINTH 19  
 IN THE YEAR 50

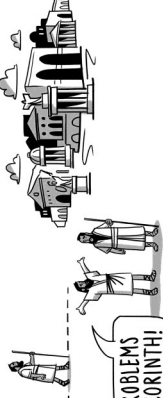
CORINTH

# 1 CORINTHIANS

SEEING EVERY PART OF LIFE THROUGH THE GOSPEL



PAUL LIVED HERE FOR 1 1/2 YEARS



BIG PROBLEMS WITH CORINTH!

- Life
- RELATIONSHIPS
- FAMILY
- COMMUNITY
- WORK

1-4

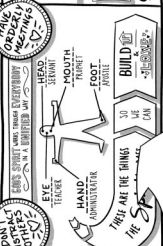
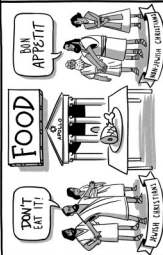
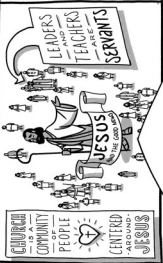
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# THE GOSPEL: AN ANNOUNCEMENT ABOUT JESUS THAT OPENS UP A NEW REALITY

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