



151st Church of Christ
Small Group Study Guide – 1 CORINTHIANS
by Richard Wolfe

AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians

Lesson 1: Introduction
TEACHER

CORINTH

Estimated population: 250,000 freemen plus 400,000 slaves



Economy: Served by 2 harbors, one on the Adriatic Sea and the other on the Aegean Sea. Goods were portaged over the isthmus.

History: Founded as early as 600 B.C., but destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. New city founded by Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. due to strategic commercial location.

Reputation: Slandered as highly immoral city by rival Athens. An often-mentioned story of 1000 temple prostitutes in the Temple of Aphrodite is unsubstantiated, and if true occurred in the original Corinth rather than the 1st century Corinth. Probably no better or worse than other port cities of comparable size.

Claim to Fame: Home of the Isthmian Games (second in importance to the Olympics) held every other year. Paul could well have been present during the games in 51 A.D. (Paul's first use of athletic analogies is in 1 Co 9:24ff).

1 CORINTHIANS and the Corinthian church

Founded: 50-51 A.D. Founded by Paul on 2nd journey (**Acts 18:1-18**)

Edified: Strengthened by Apollos (Acts 19:1).

Lost letter: Possibly a letter from Paul to Corinthians that has not been preserved (1 Co 5:9)

Letters to Paul: Apparently, the Corinthians had written to Paul asking questions (See below: Exchanges of information).

1 Corinthians: Written in response to questions from the congregation and reports of difficulties from various sources. Written from Ephesus, possibly during events of Acts 19. Cf Acts 19:10.

2 Corinthians: Written some 6 months after 1 Co.

Paul's 3rd visit (2 Cor 12:14): Second visit is obscure. Some see a reference in 2 Co 2:1, putting this visit in between 1 Co and 2 Co. Boat trip from Ephesus to Corinth took about a week.

STUDY AND DISCUSSION -- EXCHANGES of information

- Paul's 1st visit to Corinth (**Acts 18:1-18**)
 1. **Who did Paul live with in Corinth?**
 - Aquila & Priscilla
 2. **Why were they in Corinth? Discuss the challenges and advantages if this type of action were imposed on us today? (e.g., At the end of "Fiddler on the Roof," the entire Jewish community was ordered to vacate their homes.)**
 - The emperor Claudius had banished all Jews from Rome.
 3. **What changed for Paul with the arrival of Timothy and Silas?**
 - Paul was able to quit his part-time job and focus exclusively on preaching.
 4. **How long did Paul remain in Corinth?**
 - At least 18 months (v. 11, plus "a good while" in v. 18).
 5. **How would you describe the outcome of his evangelistic efforts in Corinth?**
 - Relatively successful. A diverse congregation was established even though it had some serious problems.
 6. **Based on the account in Acts 18, how would you describe Paul's relationship with the Corinthian church when he left?**
 - There is no hint of tension between Paul and the members. Acts 18:8-11, 18 suggests a good situation.
- Apollos' visit to Corinth (Acts 19:1)
- Paul's "earlier" letter (1 Co 5:9)
 7. **What was Paul's earlier letter about and why was it not sufficient to solve the Corinthian church problems? In what ways do churches and elders struggle with the same dilemmas today?**
 - Immorality in the church and how to deal with the guilty parties.
 - How to work with troubled people and hold them accountable while showing love and patience.
 - The accusation that "the church shoots its wounded" is unfair to the many elderships who strive and struggle to maintain biblical standards, but still act redemptively with members who are unfaithful.
- Questions for Paul: Some are introduced with the phrase, "now concerning," while other questions or topics lack that introduction: 1 Co 7:1, (10), 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1.
 8. **What were the topics of the questions the Corinthian Christians had asked Paul in their letter?**
 - Marriage, divorce and celibacy; food offered to idols; use of spiritual gifts; the collection for Judea.

- Reports to Paul: 1 Co 1:11 (Chloe's); 5:1 (Incest); 6:1 (Litigation); 11:18 (Lord's Supper); 15:12 (Resurrection); 16:12, 17 (contact with Apollos and others)

9. What problems had been reported to Paul and by whom?

- Division by Chloe's (1:11); Incest (5:1); Litigation (6:1); The Lord's Supper (11:18); The resurrection (15:12).
- The Chloe source may have been source for at least the topics of division, incest and litigation, and maybe all the above. Apollos, Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus could possibly have brought information.

DOCTRINAL FOUNDATION

Members of One Body

In 1 Corinthians, Paul deals with several practical matters. However, the solution to each practical problem was to be found in a doctrinal foundation. For ex., Paul didn't say that division was bad because it would keep the church from growing (a practical answer), but because it went against the doctrine of the church being one body.

The major doctrinal foundation is that Christians are members of the body of Christ. They are one body by an act of God. The challenge they faced, and that we all face, is learning to live as we should in that body. How should members interact? What's the "pecking order"? If there is no pecking order (hierarchy), what's the purpose of diverse gifts and abilities? Should we all become identical and seek the same roles and talents? It's the same problem that Jesus addressed with the apostles when they argued over who would be the greatest in the kingdom (Luke 22:24-27).

A Pilgrim People

Related to learning how the body works and how to work in the body is the pilgrim mentality of Christians. Though the term pilgrim isn't used in 1 Corinthians (cp. 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11), the theme of looking for our eternal home is, and not only in the discussion of the resurrection in chapter 15. The way Christians behave on earth is determined by their expectation of Christ's return. We indeed live between his resurrection and his 2nd coming.

Consider these statements sprinkled throughout the letter. **What is the context in each passage?** Paul links his instructions to an awareness of eternal reward or judgment.

- *(1 Cor 1:7-8) so that you come short in no gift, **eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ**, who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
- *(1 Cor 6:14) And God both raised up the Lord and **will also raise us up** by His power.*
- *(1 Cor 7:31) and those who use this world as not misusing it. For the form of **this world is passing away**.*
- *(1 Cor 11:26) For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, **you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes**.*
- *(1 Cor 15:19) **If in this life only** we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.*

DISCUSSION

10. How prevalent is an anticipation of being taken to heaven in our own thinking?

- Varies for each person. Discuss in the group. It is possibly a “fact” that we believe but which is often overlooked in daily activities.

11. What is and should be the impact of this truth?

- It reduces the importance of earthly goals and what we value.

12. How would a greater appreciation of our heavenly reward have influenced the problems in the Corinthian church?

- The selfishness, rivalries, carnal pleasures and general lack of concern for how their actions helped or hurt others would have been largely remedied.

REASONS for writing

Have we been too harsh on the Corinthians?

How hard would it have been to learn how to be a Christian for 1st century Gentiles (1 Co 6:9-11)? Where would they have learned the nature of the church as a body (The Body of Christ) where members seek to serve rather than be served, and use talents for the good of others rather than to exalt self?

Is this a letter of harsh rebuke or gentle, but firm, exhortation (1 Co 1: 4-9; 4:14)? Paul never questions their identity as Christians, though he urges them to be more spiritually focused (not an uncommon need for us all). Their problems were practical matters that could be expected among inexperienced Christians. Their problems were honest, though unpleasant mistakes more than thought through doctrinal heresies.

This was still a “New Testament church.” In spite of divisions, they were still meeting together. Absenteeism and apathy were not their sins. Paul wanted them to grow and do better, but he was patient. Their main problem was learning how to live as members of the one body of Christ.

THEME VERSE: 1 Corinthians 1:10

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

1 Corinthians: AN OUTLINE

I. Introduction, 1:1-17

- A. Greeting, 1:1-3
- B. Thanksgiving, 1:4-9
- C. The problem of division, 1:10-17

II. Human vs divine wisdom, 1:18-4:21

Theme verse: 1:18

- A. The fundamental solution to division: The cross, 1:18-25
- B. Those whom God has called, 26-31
- C. Preaching the cross, 2:1-5
- D. Spiritual vs natural perception, 2:6-16
- E. Carnal Christians, 3:1-4
- F. Ministers, followers and dividing the temple, 3:5-17
- G. No glory in man's wisdom, 3:18-4:5
- H. Fools for Christ, 4:6-21

III. Reported problems, 5:1-6:20

- A. Incest, 5:1-13
- B. Litigation, 6:1-11
- C. Flee sexual immorality, 6:12-20

IV. Questions asked, 7:1-11:1

- A. Believers, unbelievers & virgins, 7:1-40
- B. Food offered to idols, 8:1-13
- C. Examples and exhortations, 9:1-11:1
 - 1. Paul and self-denial, 9:1-27
 - 2. Lessons on idolatry from the Old Testament, 10:1-13
 - 3. Flee idolatry, 10:14-22
 - 4. Back to self-denial, 10:23-11:1
- D. Women and hats, 11:1-16

V. Reported problem – the Lord's Supper, 11:17-34

VI. Unity and spiritual gifts, 12:1-14:40

- A. To benefit everyone, 12:1-11
- B. Many members, one body, 12:12-31
- C. The greatest gift, 13:1-13
- D. Gifts in the assembly (church), 14:1-34

VII. Another report -- The resurrection, 15:1-58

VIII. Final thoughts, 16:1-24

- A. Another question, the collection, 16:1-4
- B. Paul's plans and exhortations, 16:5-24