

1 Corinthians

Author and Date

The apostle Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, probably in AD 55. The letter is also attributed to “our brother Sosthenes”, who could well be the Corinthian synagogue ruler mentioned in Acts 18:17, although Acts is not clear that he became a Christian. Perhaps Sosthenes has left Corinth and travelled with Paul, and wants to write back to his old church.

Occasion

Paul has a long background with the Corinthian church. He spent eighteen months in the city during his missionary travels (Acts 18) - one of his longest recorded stops. The church was apparently fairly large, despite opposition from the local synagogue. They had also been blessed with the ministry of other gifted teachers and leaders, notably Apollos (Acts 18:27).

However, Paul is now in Ephesus, and whilst there he has received some disturbing news from Corinth. A letter has been received from the church asking several questions - about marriage (1 Cor 7:1), about food offered to idols (8:1) and about spiritual gifts (12:1) amongst other things. Paul answers these questions from 7:1 onwards (“Now for the matters you wrote about...”). The letter, however, is not Paul’s only source of information. Members of the church have also brought him news about divisions in the congregation (1:11), and he has heard (perhaps from the same people, or perhaps just on the grapevine) that the church has been tolerating and even praising immorality (5:1). Paul obviously sees the need to address these issues with some urgency.

He may also be motivated to write by his plan to come to Corinth soon (16:5f). His visit is connected to the collection of money which he is taking up in the Gentile churches, with the aim of providing relief for poor Christians in Judea. The letter aims to ensure that everything is ready when he arrives.

Major themes in 1 Corinthians

Foolish wisdom and feeble strength

Paul criticises the Corinthian church for being taken in by worldly notions of wisdom and strength. They want impressive speaking and magnificent signs - something that they can be proud of and that will impress the people around them. Instead, Paul points them back to the cross, which turns all these ideas on their heads. God's wisdom, displayed in the death of Jesus, appears foolish to the world, and God's strength appears weak. This should teach the church to evaluate strength and wisdom differently to the world.

Factions and Divisions

Coupled to their pursuit of wisdom and strength, the Corinthian Christians have been shopping around for the most impressive looking Christian leaders to follow - some picked Paul, some Apollos, some Peter and the most sanctimonious picked Jesus. Paul points out that all Christian ministers are servants of the church. Christ is not divided; neither should the church be.

Super-spirituality

The Corinthian Christians were very keen on spirituality, and wanted to be spiritual people. This seems to have led them into two different problems. On the one hand, they thought that because they were spiritual, the physical just didn't matter. So they could do what they liked with their bodies - eating, drinking, even sexual immorality. They thought these things wouldn't affect them spiritually. Paul says they are wrong! This sort of super-spirituality also led them to look down on marriage as an earthly, unspiritual thing. Again, Paul contradicts them. On the other hand, in their pursuit of a spiritual life the Corinthians sought after spiritual experiences in a way which could become unhealthy. Paul encourages them to be discerning: just because something looks and feels spiritual doesn't mean it is good, and even good spiritual things can be abused or used selfishly.

Rights and Responsibilities

The Corinthian Christians seem to have been keen on asserting their individual rights, even when this means upsetting or offending other Christians. Paul urges them to see that they have responsibilities toward one another, and that they should be willing to give up even their legitimate rights out of love for other believers.

1 Corinthians so far...

The best way to prepare for a series of Bible studies in 1 Corinthians 12-14 would be to re-read 1 Corinthians 1-11. After all, Paul didn't intend his letter to be read in little chunks! It might be useful to read a chapter at a time and jot down some of the main things that strike you. Some thoughts to get you started...

Chapter 1 - despite their many blessings, Paul is concerned that there is division in the church and that church members are obsessed with worldly wisdom and looking good in the world; the cross is God's wisdom, which contradicts these desires.

Chapter 2 - further contrasts between the wisdom of the world - which looks outwardly impressive - and God's spiritual wisdom - which looks outwardly unimpressive.

Chapter 3 - the foolishness of division in the church, and especially of the cult of personality. All church leaders are just servants.

Chapter 4 - the Corinthian Christians want to be well thought of and to have every blessing now; they think very highly of themselves. By contrast, Paul and the other apostles suffer and are badly thought of. Which fits the gospel best?

Chapter 5 - the Corinthians have been bragging about sexual immorality in their church, probably because they see freedom from rules as part of being truly spiritual. They should, however, have kept the church pure by excommunicating the immoral church member. The church is held to higher standards than the world.

Chapter 6 - Christians in Corinth have been taking each other to court. Paul sees this as a major failure - they have been drawn out of the world, and ought not to take their disputes into the world for judgement. On the subject of sexual immorality, the

Corinthians think that it doesn't matter what a 'spiritual' person does with his body ; to the contrary, Paul points out that the Christian's body is united to Christ and a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 7 - the Corinthians are apparently of the opinion that 'spiritual' people ought not to marry. Paul thinks it is better not to marry if a person is gifted for the single life, because of the opportunities it gives for service of Christ. However, marriage is good, and sex within marriage is a good gift that neither partner should deprive the other of. Marriage is to be between believers, and is for life.

Chapter 8 - some of the Christians are unsure about eating meat. The process of slaughter had probably involved pagan rituals.

Paul knows that meat is good, if received as from God, and is happy for it to be eaten without any qualms. However, he urges those who know this to be loving towards those who are weak and are not so sure - better not to eat meat than to upset a brother.

Chapter 9 - Paul discusses his own apostolic ministry, apparently because some of the Corinthians were doubting his credentials. Paul's method had been to place as small a burden as possible on the converts - he did not ask them for money, though he might have done, and went out of his way to avoid putting any barriers in the way of their coming to faith.

Chapter 10 - the example of the people of Israel in the Old Testament shows the Corinthians that they must be careful not to fall into sin as they did. In connection with the eating of meat, the Corinthians have claimed that everything is permissible - Paul acknowledges the principle, but argues for a higher one: not all permissible things are useful or loving. All should be done for God's glory.

Chapter 11 - instructions on public worship, particularly the Lord's Supper. The church had been abusing this, eating selfishly and depriving the poor. Paul wants them to stop.

Leading Bible Studies in 1 Corinthians

Keeping a few important principles in mind will help.

1. Keep on going back to Corinth. With very familiar passages, and with church situations that seem in some ways similar to our own, it is very easy to jump too quickly to application - what does this passage mean for us today? However, good Bible study requires us to keep on asking what the passage meant for them then - what did it mean to the Corinthians? If we keep going back to Corinth, we will find that our application is richer when we do move on to ask what it means to us.
2. Keep the church in mind. We live in an individualistic culture, and we easily jump to apply Bible passages to ourselves as individuals. Although it is true that action and change will be required of each of us individually, the letter was written to a church, and the primary application will be corporate. It is about our life together, not just my life.
3. Keep going back to the passage. Most of our Bible study problems arise when we forget that we are coming together to hear Scripture and not just each others' opinions (interesting though these doubtless are!)

Using these questions

The Bible study questions in the next few pages follow the structure of the sermon series. You should feel free to customise them, change them, lead studies only loosely based on them, or not use them at all. They are hopefully a springboard to help you to begin to prepare the study that you want to lead with your group in mind.

1 Corinthians 12:1-6

Intro – what do we already know about the church in Corinth?
Look back at 1:10-12; 1:26-31; 3:1-4; 4:6-10; 5:1-2; 6:5-6; 6:15...

If that is what the church is like, what problems might we expect when it comes to discussing spiritual gifts?

The Corinthians have had some sort of spiritual experiences before they were Christians (verse 2); how are they to distinguish between these and genuine Christian experiences of the Spirit?

How might this help us to evaluate claims to spiritual experience (or our own spiritual experiences) today?

Probably no-one will come to our homegroup and curse Jesus!

But how does the principle Paul explains here help?

Do we ever resent others' spiritual gifts?

Ever feel you were dealt a fairly poor hand? Envy others' gifts?

Do we ever look down on others?

Ever feel proud? Ever think that you are God's gift to the church?

How would we know if we were going down either of those roads? How does the truth of verses 5 and 6 help us to avoid this?

1 Corinthians 12:7-11

Compare the list of gifts in this passage with Romans 12:6-8 (and any other relevant passages you can think of).

Do you feel that you know what is meant by each of these gifts?

Do you think these lists contain all the spiritual gifts available, or are they just representative?

What gifts do you tend to place at the top of the pecking order? Why?

How and why are gifts given to individuals within the church?

How should that affect your view of others' gifts? How should it affect your use of your own?

How should it change our homegroup meetings?

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

In Paul's body image, what makes us the same? What makes us different?

Or should that be "...who makes us..."?

Does the church, in your experience, reflect the diversity described in this chapter? What threatens that diversity, and how can it be maintained?

Which do you find harder to believe: that you need other Christians in the body, or that they need you?

How can we model that care for one another described in verses 21 to 26?

Does the 'order' in verse 28 undermine Paul's point about diversity? What do you think makes a gift "greater" in Paul's eyes?

What will it look like for us to desire the greater gifts?

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Why does Paul introduce this description of love at this point?
How will it speak to the Corinthian church?

What activities/gifts/personality traits are most valued in MRC?
Could we write them into verses 1 to 3?

Is service without love really worthless? Why do you think Paul makes this big claim?

Think about the church in Corinth - what has Paul seen in them?

How would I know if my service and worship were without love?

What is my motive for doing...(whatever you do)?

What makes me feel good/bad about my involvement in church life?

Do I go to church services (or homegroup) expecting primarily to give, or to receive?

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” - 1 John 3:16. When we fail to be loving, how does this truth comfort us? How does it spur us on?

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Think back to what we know of the church in Corinth. How were they failing to show the qualities of love listed here?

What difference would it make to the church in Corinth if they loved one another like this?

What description of love in these verses particularly challenges you?

Think through your involvement in church life - meetings, groups you belong to, areas of service. What changes do you need to make in the light of these verses?

Are there particular weak spots which we have as a community?
What steps do we need to take to improve?

'God is love' – how does that affect the way you read this chapter?

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

“...where there are prophecies...where there are tongues...where there is knowledge...” Why does Paul pick up these three things in verse 8?

What might he have talked about if he had been writing to Magdalen Road Church?

Some people have suggested that Paul is saying that tongues and prophecy (along with the other more miraculous gifts) will soon disappear from the church - and that this actually happened within a generation or so. (See attached notes on cessationism). How do you react to this idea? Do you agree?

How does Paul contrast the present and the future in these verses?

How does that make you feel about the future?

What excites you? What do you look forward to?

Does anything put you off the future Paul describes here?

Why is love “the greatest” according to Paul? What does that tell us about the Christian hope for the future?

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

What experience, if any, have you had of prophecy and tongues?
What has been positive/negative about that experience?

From this passage, how would you describe these gifts? What are they for?

Paul would rather people prophesy than speak in tongues. What is the principle behind that preference?

How does that link with chapter 13? Think also about nonChristians who might be present...

Do you think that these gifts should have a place in church life today? Why/why not?

How might that work, if we stick to Paul's guidelines?

What would we do differently in church/homegroup?

How large a role should different gifts play in our time together?

How would we make sure we kept a focus on love and building each other up?

1 Corinthians 14:26-40

Think back to last week - summarise what we have already seen about the use of gifts in the church service.

What does this section add to our understanding of Paul's ideal worship service? What is the principle behind his instructions?

How do we do as a church and a homegroup on this front?

Recap the series – note the key features of Corinthian church life, and perhaps put them into a table under the headings 'negative', 'neutral' and 'positive'. It would be good to note the reasons Paul gives for his assessment of their behaviour.

What aspects of church life in Corinth should we aim to reproduce? What characteristic errors should we be careful to avoid?

Is there action that we need to take as individual members of the church?

Are there changes that we need to make to our homegroup?

Cessationism

In the history of the church, there have been many teachers and theologians (often the majority) who have taught that some of the spiritual gifts discussed in 1 Corinthians were only given to the church for a short period. Usually, this period is understood to be the time before the completion of the New Testament, when the apostles were still alive. This position is known as 'cessationism' - because it is thought that certain gifts have 'ceased'.

Cessationist theologians usually argue that the more obviously miraculous gifts, like prophecy and tongues, were given primarily to authenticate the ministry of the apostles, and to serve as their accreditation. Prophecy is also thought to have been important for the church in the period before the New Testament had been completed, collected and made readily available. When this process was completed, the church would have no need of direct revelation - all Christians needed to know was in the Bible.

1 Corinthians 13:8-13 has been used to argue for cessationism. In this interpretation, the verses are understood as teaching that tongues and prophecy are given for a certain time, 'until perfection comes'. That perfection is thought to be either the mature establishment of the church, or the completion of the Scriptures. Cessationists who read these verses in this way argue that this condition has now been fulfilled. With the church established, and the New Testament complete, there is no further need for tongues and prophecy. The initial accreditation of the church has been completed, and therefore there is no more need for miraculous signs; and the revelation of Christ has been completed, and therefore there is no more need for special revelation through prophecy.

For a good summary of the issues and arguments, see Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, chapter 52 (I can lend it to you if that would be helpful!)

Resources on 1 Corinthians

A good basic commentary is the Bible Speaks Today volume, by David Prior.

Old school, but very useful - Calvin's commentary is online for free:
<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.toc.html>

As is Matthew Henry:
<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc6.iCor.i.html>

Neither of these is as tough as you might expect, and they're both useful.

Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology has a couple of excellent chapters on spiritual gifts (52 and 53 especially). It is worth having on your bookshelf as a great reference book.

