

Instruction Paper on the Letter of 1 Corinthians

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When reading the book of 1 Corinthians, one finds himself immersed in a world that seems strikingly similar to that of modern times. The church was riddled with division: a church leader had an affair with his step-mother, believers slapped lawsuits against each other, and some church members visited prostitutes and it wasn't for the purpose of outreach. This immoral behavior was ghastly to others in church who in turn called for complete sexual abstinence for the entire church. This paper will serve as a basic introduction to the letter of 1 Corinthians and present the background, content and applicability for today.

Background Circumstances of 1 Corinthians

In order to understand the book of 1 Corinthians, one must gain an understanding of the background circumstances. The city of Corinth was an influential Roman city and was the capital of Achaia¹. Because of its geographical location, Corinth became an important city of commerce². Corinth was located near an isthmus which enabled sailors to pull their ships over a narrow strip of sand, rather than sail around a dangerous section of the southern part of Greece³. Every two years Corinth was the host of the Isthmian games. These games were second in popularity next to the Olympic games in Athens. Corinth was one of the wealthiest urban centers of the Ancient Near East at that time⁴. Gordon Fee likens the Corinth of Paul's day to the Las

¹ L. Morris, "Corinthians, First Epistle to the" *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* 1:775.

² ISBE 1:775.

³ Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 9.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 2.

Vegas of modern day America⁵. And with all of its wealth and influence came the wickedness for which Corinth was known. In Classical Greek, the word *corinthiazesthai* (behaving as a Corinthian) represented gross immorality and debauchery⁶.

The apostle Paul had visited Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-17). The letter of 1 Corinthians both begins and ends by identifying Paul as the author (1:1; 16:21).

Outline of 1 Corinthians

I. Divisions (1:1-25)

A. Greetings and thanksgiving (1:1-9)

B. Divisions among believers (1:10-17)

C. Wisdom of God versus wisdom of man (1:18-2:5)

II. Wisdom and the role of the Holy Spirit (2:6-16)

A. Value of the wisdom of God (2:6-10)

B. The illumination of the Holy Spirit (2:11-16)

III. Cooperate, don't compete (3:1-23)

A. Babies in Christ (3:1-4)

B. Field of God (3:5-9)

C. Temple of God (3:10-17)

D. Wise Fools (3:18-23)

IV. Instructions for leaders of the church (4:1-21)

⁵ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 3.

⁶ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), viii.

- A. Be faithful in serving (4:1-7)
- B. Be sacrificial in serving (4:8-21)
- V. Sin in the church (5:1-6:20)
 - A. Sexual sin (5:1-5)
 - B. Lesson on leaven (5:6-13)
 - C. Lawsuits between fellow believers (6:1-8)
 - D. Sexual impropriety (6:9-20)
- VI. Guidelines for married and single believers (7:1-40)
 - A. Guidelines for those who are married (7:1-16)
 - B. Guidelines for singles (7:17-40)
- VII. Problem of eating food sacrificed to idols (8:1-13)
- VIII. The rights of an apostle (9:1-27)
 - A. What is due to an apostle (9:1-14)
 - B. What an apostle is willing to do without (9:15-27)
- IX. Temptation (10:1-11:1)
 - A. Lessons from the past (10:13-22)
 - B. Lessons from worship (10:14-22)
 - C. Guidelines to help when temptation comes (10:23-11:1)
- X. How to worship (11:2-34)
- XI. Spiritual gifts (12:1-31)
 - A. Explanation (12:1-11)
 - B. Call for unity (12:12-20)
 - C. Church interdependence (12:21-31)

- XII. The difference love makes (13:1-13)
 - A. Necessity of love (13:1-3)
 - B. Character of love (13:4-7)
 - C. Love needs to be permanent (13:8-13)

- XIII. Proper use of spiritual gifts (14:1-40)
 - A. Spiritual gifts have different purposes (14:1-12)
 - B. Use of languages (14:13-25)
 - C. Church order (14:26-40)

- XIV. Doctrine of the Resurrection (15:1-58)
 - A. A matter of most importance (15:1-11)
 - B. Resurrection power (15:12-25)
 - C. Perfect bodies (15:26-40)

- XV. Gifts and concluding thoughts (16:1-24)
 - A. A gift for fellow believers (16:1-4)
 - B. Concluding thoughts (16:5-24)

This outline is but one of many ways to study the letter of 1 Corinthians. It presents a simple breakdown of the contents of the letter while also highlighting the themes and emphases that Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth.

Major Themes and emphases of 1 Corinthians

Throughout the letter, Paul presents a laundry list of problems and concerns that he has with the body of believers at Corinth. Four of the major themes that Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians are disunity in the church and the need to love one another,

sin in the church, the need of sanctification (putting off of self), and a high emphasis on living in light of the cross.

Because of the many ongoing disputes in the church, one of the major themes of the letter is the terrible consequences of division in the church and the necessity of unity among believers. The apostle Paul repeatedly urges his readers to settle their conflicts, and allow God to unify them. Directly related to the theme of unity is the working of the Holy Spirit and the empowerment of spiritual gifts. Here, Paul admonishes the Corinthian church to give up their factionalism⁷. Paul paints a picture of the church not as a body of believers, but the body of Christ. Throughout this section of the letter, Paul repeatedly stresses the “we”. How “we” were many different but all one; “we” were baptized by one spirit. He is trying to remind them that as believers, we are all different individuals, but united together because of the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Paul pleads for the Corinthian church to not imitate men, but to imitate their Father in heaven.

In chapter five, Paul tackles the issue of incest. Interestingly, neither the man nor his sin is directly addressed by Paul. Paul’s revulsion is apparent⁸, but more than that, he argues that the church and its tolerance of immorality is disgusting. He continues his disgust of their arrogance⁹ from chapter four when he dealt with the issue that they needed to live life in light of the cross.¹⁰ From this angle, Paul writes about the need for church discipline. Paul’s concern isn’t simply the matter of the sin, rather he views the

⁷ David Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 590.

⁸ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 197.

⁹ Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, 23.

¹⁰ D. A. Carson *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids; Baker Book House, 1993), 103.

problem to be church-wide. They had become loose in their living and allowing immorality to be spread throughout the church. Paul, acting on the authority of Jesus, recommends that the church excommunicate the individual. Paul later makes reference to a similar event (2 Cor. 2:5-11). If he is referring to the same man, that man repented and returned to good standing in the church.

Paul, now takes on the issue of how believers interact with other believers. His writing (6:1-11) focuses on Christians suing other Christians in pagan courts of law. Paul views this problem as an example of the lack of understanding of love, as he will further discuss in chapter 13¹¹. Paul clearly thinks the actions of Christians suing other Christians before non-Christians is inappropriate. To him, it is a failure, and they are not living up to their responsibilities that God has given them.

Paul then returns to the issue of of immorality in the church (1 Cor. 6:12-20). The city of Corinth had a terrible reputation for sexual sin. Prostitution was everywhere. Much of it was connected with the temple of Aphrodite¹². Aphrodite was the Greek goddess of love and its temple brothel had as many as over a thousand prostitutes¹³. In the letter of 1 Corinthians, Paul writes to the church and admonishes them that believers are to live differently than they used to. Furthermore, they should not condone the use of prostitutes. Paul lists a number of sins in this section of the letter (1 Cor, 6:9-20) including all sorts of sexual sins, drunkenness and gossip. The emphasis that Paul is making is that in light of the Cross of Christ, Jesus came to offer repentance and forgiveness of sins. Once the believers had given their lives to Christ, life change was

¹¹ Marion L., *1 Corinthians* (Peabody; Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 121.

¹² Harper's Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Corinth".

¹³ The New Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Prostitution".

inevitable. Paul wrote in a another letter, that believers were not to let sin press them into its mold (Romans 12:2). In this section, Paul is asking the believers to put off their old selves and to live as Christ would have them to live. He urges them to be sanctified, to be set-apart for the glory of God and not for the glory of man.

The Credibility of the letter of 1 Corinthians

Paul looked back at his former life with regret as an ardent Pharisee, particularly his persecution of the Christian church¹⁴. This is probably why he felt unworthy to be called by the title of apostle (1 Cor. 15:9). In Galatians, he wrote that he persecuted the church violently (Gal. 1:13). But the Paul that writes the letter of 1 Corinthians is a changed man. He has become a mature believer. The old life is behind him and God has used Paul to plant the church in Corinth as well. After establishing the church at Corinth, he returned to Antioch and from there set off on his third missionary journey, ultimately settling in Ephesus for a period of a few years¹⁵. While he was in Ephesus, Paul began to hear of the problems with which his young church was struggling. Shortly before writing the letter, a delegation arrived from Corinth with a financial gift to Paul. With the gift, they also had some questions for Paul to address. At the time of this letter, Paul had been involved in missionary work for over a decade¹⁶. The letter of 1 Corinthians both begins and ends by identifying Paul as the author (1:1; 16:21) and this

¹⁴ Ben Witherington III *Conflict & Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 5.

¹⁵ Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, 21.

¹⁶ Witherington III, 5.

fact has usually been undisputed throughout history¹⁷. Many scholars understand the letter to be written around A.D. 51 from the city of Ephesus¹⁸. Paul wrote this letter in response to a letter that was sent to him from the Corinthian congregation (1 Cor. 7:1) as well as the delegation that traveled to see him¹⁹. Also, Paul wrote that he was writing the letter on the authority of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 5:4) and that these issues had to be confronted, even though he was with them in spirit only. With there having been at least three, maybe four letters written to the Corinthian church²⁰, it does indicate that Paul's authority was at least questioned by some at the church. 1 and 2 Corinthians and at least one of the "lost" letters are corrective in nature²¹. Paul also sent Timothy to represent him to the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10).

The relevancy of 1 Corinthians to the present day American church

Correct interpretation of all Scripture is so important. Scholars from all theological perspectives argue that their interpretation of 1 Corinthians is legitimate and that others are not to be trusted. It is evident that some of the same divisiveness of Paul's day is still evident today. That said, there is so much content in 1 Corinthians that is relevant and applicable to believers today.

Many of the issues that the Corinthian church struggled with were the result of the church carrying over pagan practices that were acceptable to the Corinthian culture.

¹⁷ ISBE, 775.

¹⁸ ISBE, 777.

¹⁹ Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, 22.

²⁰ MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, viii.

²¹ MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, ix.

For example, divisiveness was an acceptable practice in Corinth by using status as a way to gain notoriety²². Members of the Corinthian church were seeking status within it. We know this because Paul addressed this issue head on in this letter (1:10-11; 4:6). Today, this issue is still at the forefront of American Christianity, often through the door of church politics. Believers want better standing with certain groups/individuals, and will sometimes do whatever it takes to gain notoriety, sometimes even to the destruction of others. Christ calls believers to a life of humility and equality²³. The ground is level at the foot of cross. There is no one above another. Paul would write the same thing to the church today as he did to the Corinthian church - consider the wisdom of the world versus the wisdom of the cross. The wisdom of the world says “do whatever it takes to get up the rungs of the ladder”; the wisdom of the cross says “its not about you, its about what Christ did, and we are to exemplify the life of Christ”. Paul went on to write that God is the judge, not believers (I Cor. 3:12-15).

A second relevant and applicable section of 1 Corinthians is when Paul confronts the church about what type of sex is wrong and what type is good. Apparently some of the Corinthians were arguing that because they were adults and weren't breaking the law by having sex outside of marriage, they were doing nothing wrong. Paul responds by saying that the body belongs to the Lord who made it. All that we do in our body, including having sex, is a spiritual matter that greatly affects our relationship with Jesus (1 Cor. 6:15-17). In modern day America, sex has a grip on society. Our society has decided that sex must be worshipped, and it is rampant everywhere from strip clubs, to

²² H. Douglas Buckwalter, “The Corinthian Correspondence—Letters from a Troubled Apostle to a Troubled Church” (lecture, Evangelical Theological Seminary, Myerstown, PA, March 2, 2010).

²³ Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, 76

internet pornography, to friends-with-benefits. Paul would write to the modern-day American church just as he wrote to the Corinthian church: abstain from immorality. God's people are commanded to run from any and every form of sexual sin as Joseph ran from Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39). Because our body belongs to God, we must say no to sinful sex. Paul was quick to point out that we cannot do this in our own strength but must rely on the Holy Spirit who will enable us to abstain from sexual immorality.

In chapter 4, Paul admonishes Christian leaders and tells them what to expect from the ministry. They are to be servants using their gifts from God and stewards who oversee the church. Christian leaders will stand before God someday, and they must be sustained by the grace of God. Paul is telling the Corinthian church (and the American church), that ministry is all about laboring for an audience of One. It isn't about seeking approval from the masses; its about seeking approval from the Creator. It isn't about seeing how high you can climb on the ladder; its about seeing how humble one can be. It isn't about seeking the wisdom of the world; its about seeking the wisdom of the Cross. Paul is also writing that Christian ministry is about the grace of God. God's grace saves Christian leaders, gives them the spiritual gifts and empowers them for service.

In the American church world, often it is the flashy that is successful. Sometimes a lot of bad things are done in the name of Christ. Paul is writing that often there will be no notice of what one is doing for the sake of Christ, the amount of hours invested in ministry will sometimes will be exhausting, there will be people and groups that will disappoint, there will be people that talk negative and even tell lies. Sometimes the temptation will be there to give up, but remember, believers labor for the sake of the Gospel. It isn't about one's own self, it is about Him, the king of kings and Lord of Lords.

He was the answer for the troubled church in Corinth and He is the answer for the troubled church in America.

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