Introduction for 1 Corinthians Study

**Back to the Gospel:**

Spiritual Help for a Troubled Church

Key Verse: 15:1

**“Now brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.”**

1. Author, place and date of writing

Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians to the Corinthian church, probably in the winter of A.D. 55 while he was in Ephesus (1Co16:8).

1. Origin of the church

According to Acts 18, the Holy Spirit led Paul to Corinth on his second missionary journey. There he met Aquila and Priscilla, who were tentmakers, as he was, and he stayed and worked with them (Ac18:3). Soon Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ (Ac18:5). When they opposed Paul, he left them and began preaching to the Gentiles (Ac18:6). Many Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized (Ac18:8). But fear came into Paul’s heart and he didn’t want to speak anymore. Then the Lord appeared to him 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.” So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God (Ac18:9-11). In this way, the church in Corinth was born. Most of the new believers there were from the lower class (1Co1:26). Some of them had lived very wicked lives (1Co6:11). But they were washed by the blood of Jesus and sanctified by the Holy Spirit and became members of the body of Christ in Corinth. After Paul left Corinth for Ephesus, Apollos came and his Bible teaching was a great help to many believers (Ac18:24,27,28).

1. Type of letter and purpose of writing

In contrast to some of Paul’s general epistles to be circulated more widely, 1 Corinthians was very specifically written for the people and problems of the Corinthian church. Paul had previously written a letter to them (5:9), had received reports about them (1:11; 5:1), and had received questions from them (7:1,25; 8:1; 12:1). So in this letter he responds in detail. In his answers we can see his compassionate pastor’s heart and gospel faith in dealing with their specific problems. He rebuked them with a father’s love and corrected their wrongdoings in order to teach them what Christian life really should be. He did not compromise with the culture in Corinth; instead, he brought them back to the gospel of Jesus.

1. Background of the city

 On the Balkan Peninsula, advantageously located on the isthmus connecting mainland Greece to the Peloponnesus, near Athens and Sparta, “the legs of Greece,” Corinth became a center of communication, trade and politics. In the Hellenistic period (fourth through first centuries B.C.) Corinth, Thebes, Athens and Sparta were the most powerful Greek cities.

Around 146 B.C. the Roman general Lucius Mummius destroyed Corinth and sold the women and children into slavery. About 100 years later Julius Caesar rebuilt it. Soon it regained and even surpassed its former wealth and beauty, splendor and power. By the time of the Emperor Augustus Corinth had become the capital of the province of Achaia. And by the time of Paul, Corinth had grown into a large city with a population of 600,000. Some 400,000 Corinthians were slaves, and only 200,000 were freemen. Many were Greek and many were Roman colonists and Jews.

As Corinth’s commerce flourished, one “couldn’t go down the street without meeting a philosopher”—such was the vogue of traditional philosophy in ancient Greece. Corinth also held the Isthmus Games in the fashion of the Olympics and was first in the Roman gladiator matches. Polytheism dominated the intellectual circles, and corruption and debauchery were prevalent. There were one thousand female priestesses in the temple of Aphrodite, who served Venus the goddess of love. Most of them were prostitutes. To “Corinthianize” became synonymous with luxury, dissipation, drunkenness and filth. Those who went to Corinth could enjoy such things but would lose everything in the process. Hence the ancient adage, “Don’t turn toward Corinth.”

1. Major theme and characteristics of the letter

The major theme of 1 Corinthians is “Back to the Gospel.” The gospel is that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and was raised from the dead. So at the beginning of the letter Paul mentions the cross, and at the conclusion he discusses the resurrection. In between Paul uses gospel principles in dealing with church problems.

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| Chapters | 1,2 | 3-14 | 15,16 |
| Main themes | Cross | Gospel Principles | Resurrection |
| Sub-themes | God’s wisdom/ man’s wisdom  Message of the cross: the power and wisdom of God | *Divisions (3,4)*: No more boasting about men; boast only about Jesus (1:31; 3:21)  *Sexual immorality (5; 6:12-20)*: Expel, flee and honor God with your body  *Lawsuits (6:1-11)*: Decide matters among believers, not in court  *Marriage (7)*: Fulfill your duty, don’t divorce, remain in the situation God called you to  *Wounding weak brothers (8,9):* Love builds up; becoming all things to all men  *Abusing privileges (10:1-11:1):* Do it all for the glory of God; seek the good of others  *Church disorder (11:2-34):*Reverence in worship and fellowship  *Disregard of fellow believers (12:1-31a):* Each member is part of the body of Christ  *Childishness (12:31b-13:13):* Love  *Showing off in the church (14):* Edify the church | *Denying the bodily resurrection (15):* Christ’s bodily resurrection is the firstfruits of all believers |

1. Purpose of our study

Today we are living in a polytheistic, multicultural and hedonistic society very similar to that of Corinth. Many of the spiritual problems in the Corinthian church are also our problems in our churches and fellowships. Through the study of 1 Corinthians we can find spiritual help by coming back to the gospel of Jesus’ cross and resurrection. Then we live healthy Christian lives and have healthy church fellowship. Let’s go back to the gospel.

1. Outline

I. Greetings and Thanksgiving (1:1-9)

A. Greetings (1:1-3)

B. Thanksgiving (1:4-9)

II. Divisions in the church (1:10-4:21)

A. Paul’s appeal for perfect unity in mind and thought (1:10-17)

B. Christ crucified: the power and wisdom of God (1:18-25)

C. So that no one may boast (1:26-31)

D. Paul’s message and his preaching (2:1-5)

E. God’s secret wisdom (2:6-10a)

F. Wisdom received through the Spirit (2:10b-16)

G. Divisions: a symptom of spiritual immaturity (3:1-4)

H. Only God, working through his servants (3:5-9)

I. Be careful how you build on Christ (3:10-17)

J. No more boasting about men! (3:18-23)

K. How to view God’s servants (4:1-5)

L. Paul’s fatherly admonishions (4:6-21)

III. Problems in the church (5:1-8:13)

A. Expel the immoral member from among you (5:1-13)

B. Don’t sue a Christian brother; remember God’s grace (6:1-11)

C. Flee from sexual immorality (6:12-20)

D. Marital duty and celibacy (7:1-9)

E. Remain in the situation God called you to (7:10-24)

F. Undivided devotion to the Lord (7:25-40)

G. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (8:1-3)

H. Knowledge about food sacrificed to idols (8:4-8)

I. Don’t destroy a weak brother by your knowledge (8:9-13)

IV. The rights and responsibilities of God’s servant (9:1-27)

A. The rights of an apostle (9:1-14)

B. Paul did not use his rights: his reward (9:15-18)

C. All things to all men (9:19-23)

D. Run in such a way as to get the prize (9:24-27)

V. Proper behavior, fellowship and worship (10:1-11:34)

A. Warnings and encouragement to God’s people (10:1-13)

B. Flee idolatry; worship God purely (10:14-22)

C. Using our Christian freedom: glorifying God; building up others (10:23-11:1)

D. Propriety in worship (11:2-16)

E. Paul rebukes irreverence toward the Lord’s Supper (11:17-22)

F. The meaning of the Lord’s Supper (11:23-26)

G. The right attitude toward the Lord’s Supper (11:27-34)

VI. Spiritual gifts (12:1-14:40)

A. The basis of spiritual gifts (12:1-3)

B. The same Spirit; different gifts (12:4-11)

C. The body of Christ: unity in the diversity (12:12-31a)

D. Love indispensable (12:31b-13:3)

E. Love is . . . (13:4-7)

F. Love never fails (13:8-13)

G. Prophecy is better than tongues (14:1-25)

H. Orderly worship (14:26-40)

VII. The resurrection (15:1-58)

A. The gospel of the resurrection (15:1-11)

B. The power of the resurrection (15:12-34)

C. The glory of the resurrection (15:35-58)

VIII. Epilogue (16:1-24)

A. The collection for God’s people (16:1-4)

B. Personal requests (16:5-18)

C. Final greetings (16:19-24)