

WELCOME TO CORINTH

–MESSY (BUT BEAUTIFUL) CHRISTIANITY, WEEK 1–

I. THE “BEAUTIFUL” AUTHOR OF 1 CORINTHIANS

- Paul, Apostle and Missionary (1:1)
- From a Jewish Background (Phil 3:4-6; Gal 1:13-14; Acts 22:3)
- From a Greco-Roman Background (Acts 22:3; skilled with Greek language and rhetoric)
- A Former Persecutor of Jesus (Gal 1:13-16, 23; 1 Cor 15:9; Acts 9)
- Writer of seven letters that are considered “undisputed,” including 1 Corinthians (No one questions that 1 Corinthians was actually written by the Apostle Paul).
- The New Testament writer that you can “get to know” the most, since he shows us his heart and personality in his writings more than any other New Testament author (See, for example, 1 Cor 4:14-17; 2 Cor 11:21-33; 1 Cor 13:1-4; 1 Thes 2:1-13). Some of Paul’s most poignant writings are found in his letters to the church at Corinth.

II. THE “MESSY” RECIPIENTS OF 1 CORINTHIANS

- A church planted by Paul during a year and a half long stay in the city, where he met Priscilla and Aquilla, with whom he stayed and worked (Acts 18:1-11).
- A church living in a wealthy and rollicking city that was “at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world” (Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 3). The old Greek city of Corinth was destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC. In 44 BC it was refounded as a Roman Colony by Julius Caesar, no doubt because of its strategic location on a narrow bridge of land between the large Peloponnese Peninsula to the south and the rest of Greece to the north. This controlled both north and south trade, but also east west trade from harbor to harbor across the narrow land bridge.

“As the description by Strabo some fifty years later makes abundantly clear, prosperity returned to the city almost immediately. Since money attracts people like dead meat attracts flies, Corinth quickly experienced a great influx of people from both West and East, and along with all the attendant gains and ills of such growth. The Romans were dominant; they brought with them not only their laws but also their culture and religions. But the Roman world had been thoroughly Hellenized; and since Corinth was historically Greek, it maintained many of those ties—religion, philosophy, the arts. And from the East came the mystery cults of Egypt and Asia and the Jews with their synagogue and “peculiar” belief in a single God.

Since Corinth lacked a landed aristocracy, an aristocracy of money soon developed, along with a fiercely independent spirit. But not all would strike it rich; hence thousands of artisans and slaves made up the bulk of the population. Most likely, however, the splendid wealth of the city spilled over to the advantage of these people as well.

As often happens in such centers, vice and religion flourished side by side. Old Corinth had gained such a reputation for sexual vice that Aristophanes (*ca.* 450-385 BC) coined the verb *korinthiazō* (=to act like a Corinthian, i.e., to commit fornication). The Asclepius room in the present museum in Corinth provides mute evidence of this facet of city life; here on one wall are a large number of clay votives of human genitals that had been offered to the god for the healing of that part of the body, apparently ravaged by venereal disease. This aspect of Corinthian life, however, has tended to be overplayed by most NT scholars, relying on Strabo’s (surely erroneous) description of the thousand temple prostitutes who were alleged to have plied their trade at the temple of Aphrodite on the Acrocorinth. In the first place Strabo was speaking of Old Corinth, and even then it is doubtful whether his information was accurate. Sexual sin was there undoubtedly in abundance; but it would have been of the same kind that one would expect in any seaport where money flowed freely and women and men were available.

The religious expression of Corinth was diverse as its population. Pausanias describes at least 26 sacred places (not all were temples) devoted to the “gods many” (the Roman-Greek pantheon) and “lords

many” (the mystery cults) mentioned by Paul in the present letter (8:5)—and Pausanias does not mention the Jewish synagogue, whose partial lintel with the inscription “synagogue of the Hebrews” has been discovered. Although there is no direct evidence for it, the very wealth that attracted artisans and tradesmen undoubtedly also lured to Corinth artists and philosophers of all kinds, in search of patronage. The latter would also have included a fair share of itinerants and charlatans” (Fee, 2-3).

- A church of mostly Gentile Christians who had converted from paganism and still struggled with carrying over past beliefs and behaviors, making it probably the most dysfunctional and troubled church we know of in the New Testament.

“At least three instances that speak of their former way of life explicitly indicate that they were former idolaters and therefore chiefly Gentiles (6:9-11; 8:7; 12:2). Other items imply the same: e.g., the whole matter of going to the temple feasts (8:1-10:22; see esp. 8:10) is a strictly Gentile phenomenon; the attitude toward marriage, thinking it is a sin (chap. 7), scarcely fits Judaism, even Hellenistic Judaism; going to the proconsul, or city magistrates, for adjudication (6:1-11) fits the normal processes of the Greeks and Romans within the city, whereas the Jews were forbidden to ask Gentiles for judgments. Their arguing for the right to go the prostitutes (6:12-20) and their denial of a future bodily resurrection (15:1-58) also sound more Hellenistic than Jewish” (Fee, 4).

III. RECONSTRUCTION OF THE “MESSY” CORINTHIAN CORRESPONDENCE

From a careful reading of 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, we can piece together Paul’s interactions with this troubled church. Interestingly, we can see that there were actually four letters that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth (Letters A B C D). What we know as 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians are actually the second and fourth letters in this correspondence (Letters B and D). We can surmise some content of the two letters we don’t have (Letters A and C) from those we do have (Letters B and D).

A Timeline of Paul’s Communication with Corinthian Church

- A. **Paul Wrote Letter A, (*now lost*): He warned them not to associate with immoral people** (1 Cor 5:9, “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people”).
 - **Paul received an oral report about what was happening in Corinth** (1 Cor 1:11, “My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you”).
 - **as well as a letter with questions carried by Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus** (1 Cor 16:17, “I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you”; 1 Cor 7:1, “Now for the matters you wrote about...”).
- B. **Paul Wrote Letter B, *Our 1 Corinthians*: from Ephesus in the year 55, he is planning to visit them, and sent Timothy to them** (1 Cor 16:5-6, 10–11, “After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia. Perhaps I will stay with you for a while, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go.... When Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am. No one, then, should treat him with contempt. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. I am expecting him along with the brothers”), **but then changed plans to visit them twice, on the way to Macedonia and on the way back, and to collect money for the poor in Jerusalem** (2 Cor 1:17-18, “Because I was confident of this, I wanted to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea. Was I fickle when I intended to do this? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say both ‘Yes, yes’ and ‘No, no’?”).
 - **Paul made what he calls a “painful visit” to Corinth** (2 Cor 2:1, “So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you”),

- **This “painful visit” failed to fix the problems in Corinth** (2 Cor 2:9-11, “Another reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything. Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes”; 2 Cor 7:12, “So even though I wrote to you [*talking about Letter C, below*], it was neither on account of the one who did the wrong nor on account of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are”), **and Paul leaves Corinth.**
- C. Paul Wrote Letter C, the “Sorrowful Letter” (*now lost*):** (2 Cor 2:4. “For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you,” 2 Cor 7:8, “Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter . . .”), **from Ephesus, carried to Corinth by Titus, a letter which commanded the discipline of Paul’s opponents, though Paul still expected Titus to collect an offering for the poor Christians in Jerusalem** (2 Cor 8:6, “So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part”), **which showed that Paul didn’t view the Corinthian church as fully unfaithful to Christ.**
- **When trouble arose in Ephesus, Paul went to Troas looking for Titus, but didn’t find Titus and so headed for Macedonia** (2 Cor 2:12-13, “Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia”). **He took up the collection in Macedonia, and waited for Titus and Corinth’s response to the “sorrowful letter.”**
 - **Titus met him and gave glad report** (2 Cor 7:5-9, “For when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever. Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us”).
- D. Paul Wrote Letter D, our 2 Corinthians from Macedonia** (2 Cor 1:15) **in the year 56, responding to the good news Paul had received through Titus and confronting other issues.**

IV. THE “MESSY” REASONS FOR WRITING 1 CORINTHIANS

- To help a congregation of immature Christians still dominated by cultural values of admiring rhetoric and showy wisdom, and self-promotion and social-climbing. They held to triumphalism, not a theology of the cross. They thought of themselves as spiritual and that their experience of spiritual resurrection meant physical and sexual ethics were unimportant.

“Although they were the Christian church in Corinth, an inordinate amount of Corinth was yet in them, emerging in a number of attitudes and behaviors that required radical surgery without killing the patient. This is what this letter attempts to do” (Fee 4).
- Paul is responding to negative reports he has heard about the church (1:11; 5:1; 11:18), as well as responding to questions that the Corinthians have sent him (7:1).

V. THE “BEAUTIFUL” RESULTS OF PAUL’S LETTERS TO CORINTH

- One result is that Paul’s letters succeeded in winning over the Corinthians. 1 Clement, a book in a collection called the Apostolic Fathers, is a letter from the church of Rome to the church in Corinth written late in the first century (25 to 45 years after Paul writes). The Corinthian church is still

having problems, but they are clearly still Christian, and Clement praises their history of faith. This shows the Corinthian church responded well to Paul’s rebukes and remained faithful to Christ.

“The church of God that sojourns in Rome to the church of God that sojourns in Corinth, to those who are called and sanctified by the will of God through our Lord Jesus Christ.... Has anyone ever visited you who did not approve your most excellent and steadfast faith? Who did not admire your sober and magnanimous piety in Christ? Who did not proclaim the magnificent character of your hospitality? Who did not congratulate you on your complete and sound knowledge?” (1 Clement 1:1-2).

“Take up the epistle of the blessed Paul the apostle. What did he first write to you in the beginning of the gospel? Truly he wrote to you in the Spirit about himself and Cephas and Apollos, because even then you had split into factions (*see 1 Cor 1:10-17*). Yet that splitting into factions brought less sin upon you, for you were partisans of highly reputed apostles and of a man approved by them. In contrast now think about those who have perverted you and diminished the respect due your renowned love for others. It is disgraceful, dear friends, yes utterly disgraceful and unworthy of your conduct in Christ, that it should be reported that the well-established and ancient church of the Corinthians, because of one or two persons, is rebelling against its presbyters” (1 Clement 47:1-6).

- A second result is that we are left with 1 and 2 Corinthians, two of the most theologically rich and beautiful letters in the New Testament. God did not waste the “messiness” of the Corinthians.

VI. SOME KEY “BEAUTIFUL” THEMES OF 1 CORINTHIANS

- **A theology of the Cross instead of a theology of Glory** (1:18-30; 4:6-13)
Meaning: Jesus suffered before glory, and the path of those following him will be the same.
- **An emphasis on life in the church as Christ’s temple and body** (3:16-17; 14:24-25; 10:17; 12:12-27; 5:12-13)
Meaning: The church is sacred, and participation in the church is a matter of life and death.
- **The Holy Spirit as a key experience of Christian Life** (2:1-16; 12:13; ch. 14)
Meaning: Central to Christian conversion, worship, and life is the experienced Spirit.
- **“Already-but-not-yet” Eschatology and Ethics** (4:20; 6:9-11; 7:29-31; 10:11-12; ch. 15)
Meaning: in Christ the age of restoration and salvation has come, yet we await the final fulfillment of it all. So we are called to “live out what we are” based on our position in Christ.
- **The Centrality of the Resurrection of Jesus to the gospel** (ch. 15)
Meaning: The resurrection of Jesus is the climax of the gospel and central to the faith.

VII. BASIC OUTLINE OF 1 CORINTHIANS

- I. **Prologue** (1:1-9)
- II. **Divisions in the Church** (1:10-ch. 4)
- III. **Response to Reports Received:** incest, lawsuits, sexual immorality (ch. 5-6)
- IV. **Response to Their Letter:** marriage, food/idols, men/women, the Lord’s Supper, Spiritual gifts, the Resurrection (ch. 7-15)
- V. **Instructions about collection for Jerusalem; Conclusion** (ch. 16)

THE BOTTOM LINE

_____ to bring _____ from the _____ of _____

...by _____ that the life of a Christian will not be one of pure _____, but _____ and _____.

...by _____ life in _____ and repenting of any _____ or _____.

...by _____ live in step with the experienced _____ every day.

...by _____ what is yours _____ and living out “_____” in that holiness.

...by _____ in Christ’s _____ and allowing this confidence to fuel your _____.

(Okay, now which one of these five ways do you most need to dwell on and put into practice this week?)