



## Week 41 1 Corinthians

On Sunday evenings at [Bible Explorer](#) we will explore the question

### ***'What does this book from the Bible mean for us today?'***

The church at Corinth was founded around AD50 after Paul visited the city on his 'second missionary journey' (Acts 18). It was a thriving commercial centre with a cosmopolitan community but a by-word for excess and sexual licence giving rise to the word 'corinthianise' ("to be licentious").

The new church, like the city, had a 'thriving' appearance, revelling in the idea of freedom in Christ and in the use of spiritual gifts. But Paul was concerned about stories of gross immorality and wrote a letter (1 Cor 5:9) which is now generally thought to be lost. The letter we now call '1 Corinthians' followed later (around AD54), in part because Paul had heard of further concerns and in part to address some specific questions that the Corinthians had asked him (1 Cor 7:1).

1 Corinthians contains a lot less than, say, Romans by way of theological or doctrinal teaching. There is nevertheless some important material on the cross, the resurrection and the subject of love, all of which helps to reinforce the main purpose of the letter which is to give practical advice on a wide variety of issues in church life.

The general tone of the letter may be seen as negative rather than positive, i.e. the focus is on putting right things which the church was getting wrong rather than on commending it for its 'successes'. It will presumably have made uncomfortable reading for the Corinthians. It appears that the church was not initially receptive to the message, such that Paul changed his plans (2 Cor 1:15) and made a hasty visit, which was a painful experience (2 Cor 2:1) in that it seems that at least some of the church strongly rebuffed him. 2 Cor 2:4 suggests that he then wrote a 'severe' letter (again, almost certainly now lost), which he initially regretted because he was worried about the reaction it would receive, but he was overjoyed to find that it had in fact led to repentance (2 Cor 7:9) and the letter now known as 2 Corinthians was then written (around AD55) in his relief and joy.

### **How do we apply a book like 1 Corinthians today?**

As the letter would have made uncomfortable reading for the Corinthians, it is potentially uncomfortable reading for our church (and almost any other church) today. There are lots of instructions in it with which it could be said that we are not complying. There may be a good reason for this in that the precise instructions might be directly relevant only to the community to which they were written and although, in line with 2 Timothy 3:16, all of the letter remains "useful" to us we have to interpret and apply it in our different age and setting.

It is important that we do not simply put the 'hard bits' of 1 Corinthians (or any other part of the Bible) into the 'too difficult' box. We need to examine it carefully to see what it is saying to us today. Even if after doing this with 1 Corinthians we conclude that we are not being called to make any changes, we will have gained a priceless benefit from thinking holistically about the Bible and be able to use that to respond graciously and in an informed manner when questioned about contemporary issues like homosexuality and women bishops.



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**The cross** (1:18-2:16): The people of Corinth placed a high value on wisdom and knowledge, but Paul stresses that God's wisdom is very different from that of the world. This is most clearly seen in the 'foolishness' of the cross. The point is important in getting the right perspective on the practical issues discussed throughout the letter.

**The resurrection** (ch 15): This is the most detailed exposition on the resurrection in the whole Bible. Particularly significant in the context of this letter is the stress on the 'bodily' resurrection and the consequent mistake in assuming that someone's spiritual life can be considered distinct from what they do physically.

**Love** (ch 13): While this beautifully-written passage underpins all the practical issues covered in the letter (and indeed elsewhere in the Bible) it is worth noting that it is carefully placed between the two chapters that consider the exercise of spiritual gifts.

**Divisions and spoilt relationships:** Problems included factions (ch 3), pursuing personal 'rights' (6:1-8) and self-centredness (11:17-34). But what happens when different people feel differently about the right approach to 'practical issues'?

**Discipline** (ch 5): This is to be taken seriously – but what does 'expel' mean and is this 'judging' (cf Matt 7:1-5)? Note this instruction specifically relates only to believers (vs 9-10).

**Church worship and spiritual gifts:** Holy Communion is important (11:17-34) – a corporate activity and not to be taken lightly (vs 27-32). Public worship (14:26-40) should be 'orderly' (v 40) but that certainly does not mean it should be staid and everyone should contribute (v 26). Spiritual gifts of all types (ch 12) are to be welcomed and the gift of tongues should not be overemphasised, especially in comparison with prophecy (ch 14). The appropriate use of spiritual gifts is a significant outreach tool (14:23-25).

**Marriage and food sacrificed to idols:** On these subjects, Paul seems to make recommendations rather than giving absolute direction. While Paul is not negative about marriage (ch 7), he is very positive about singleness (vs 38 & 40). The key point in relation to food sacrificed to idols (ch 8 and 10:23-11:1) appears to be ensuring that others are not led astray (8:9-13).

**Dress, women and sex:** Paul sets out specific prohibitions for the Corinthians relating to a variety of issues on which there is a lot of debate about how they apply to us today.

- Very few Christians would now apply the teaching on dress and appearance (11:3-16) literally, but is it still saying something to us about our attitude?
- On the other hand, just about all Christians would (still?) hold to the instructions given in relation to casual sex (6:12-20).
- Over the last few decades, the prevalent Christian view on the role of women has moved, in line with that of society generally, away from the line originally thought to be indicated by Paul (11:3-16 & 14:33-35, but note also 11:3 & 16:19) to one in which men and women are seen as equally suited to take on any leadership position.
- Christians are now coming under increasing pressure to modify their traditional stance on active homosexuality (6:9-11) to one that is more aligned with today's general view.