



We are beginning one of the most important letters that Paul wrote to the churches he had begun. ***The church at Corinth*** had been established on one of Paul's previous missionary journeys. The apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthian church covers many different theological and practical questions, but there is one central issue he is addressing: Unity.

The Corinthian church was fractured, and the chief reason was pride. This pride manifested itself in a skewed view of the gospel, which led to sinful attitudes about things such as speech and knowledge, and a misuse of their spiritual gifts.

Like many churches today, the Corinthian church was very gifted. The people were intellectually sharp; some were financially blessed. They were variously talented and had very visible and powerful gifts from the Holy Spirit. Yet those gifts were not submitted to the greatest of the Spirit's purposes in human lives—namely love.

Paul argues throughout this letter ... that Christ-exalting, cross-defined love must replace the puffed-up pride that coursed through this church. In fact, a key principle in 1 Corinthians is that ... giftedness without character leads to bondage and sin, not freedom and redemption.

At the heart of this book is the reality of the cross and the resurrection of Christ. Paul admonishes this church to return to the logic and pattern of the gospel, so that pride is replaced with humility and servant-hearted love and unity.

Historical Context and Background

- The city of Corinth was believed to be a city of approximately 600,000 people when this was written to them.
- One of the outskirts of Corinth was Cenchrea, which was a seaport.
- This was a thriving city with much evil.
- They were thought of as being one of the wealthiest cities of the area.
- There was a mixture of nationalities here.
- Greeks and Romans made up the majority of the people.
- This city had many false gods and goddesses.
- The most prominent of the false worship was of the goddess Aphrodite.
- There were over 1000 prostitutes working to win converts to this very sensual religion. This was a very evil city.

The democratic way of life was foremost here, and debates were allowed on all subjects. This perhaps, was the reason Paul had an easy time being heard at first.

- The most serious problem of the Corinthian church was worldliness, an unwillingness to divorce the culture around them.
- Most of the believers could not consistently separate themselves from their old, selfish, immoral, and pagan ways!

Who wrote the book?

The apostle Paul follows the normal pattern for writing a letter in ancient times. Paul had an extensive history of contact with the city of Corinth, beginning with when he established the church in Corinth, coming there after Athens and staying a year and a half (Acts 18).

- Four years prior to writing the letter we know as 1 Corinthians ... the apostle had spent 18 months in Corinth, so he was intimately familiar with the church and many of its congregants. He wrote a letter to the Christians in Corinth from the city of Ephesus (Acts 19), which is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9. This “previous letter” is lost.
- Paul then received reports from people in Chloe’s household about disturbances in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:11); and he may have received a delegation from Corinth (1 Corinthians 16:7) who brought him questions from the congregation (1 Corinthians 7:1).

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to respond to these reports. But because of all the time Paul spent in Corinth, and all the letters he wrote them ... we know more about the Christians at Corinth than we know about any other church in the New Testament.

Why is First Corinthians so important?

1 Corinthians is a frank discussion of the church ... and the issues that impacted real people in the first century. The Corinthian church was corroded with sin on a variety of fronts, so Paul provided an important model for how the church should handle the problem of sin in its midst. Rather than turn a blind eye toward relational division and all kinds of immorality, he addressed the problems head on. In his bold call to purity within the Corinthian church, Paul made it clear that he was willing to risk the good opinion of some ... in order to help cleanse the sin that tainted the church.

Christianity calls us to sacrifice instead of living for oneself. We have to choose one or the other — we can't do both. The Christians in Corinth tried to live the Christian life in a worldly way. Paul wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians to a divided and self-centered people ... to remind them to follow Jesus and only Jesus!