



THAT MESSED-UP CHURCH

Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians¹

Structure/Genre:

- First and foremost, this book of the Bible is a letter, and as such, should be read within its historical context. This particular letter is *in response* to questions and concerns shared by the Corinthian church.
- Most of Paul's letters were written as communication to groups and included content that "Paul is willing for an entire congregation to hear."² Incidentally, many of Paul's letters are longer than the average private letter of the first century.
- As you read this letter, watch for these common elements of ancient letters:
 - The name of the writer
 - The name(s) of the addressee
 - A greeting
 - The body (including a thanksgiving prayer, the substance of the letter, and often a summary or travelogue)
 - Ethical or practical advice, and
 - A conclusion with final greetings and a benediction
- This letter is structured according to five basic themes (see heading to follow). Reading sections rather than just "chapters" will assist in your understanding of the letter as a whole.

Authorship:

- Paul is presumed to be the author of this letter to the Corinthian church.³
- Paul was a pastor and wrote "to meet specific needs [and] deal with specific problems," particularly in this letter to the Corinthians. Having said that, many of these problems still plague the church today and have much to teach us as well.
- Paul uses common rhetoric of the era, likely speaking the letter aloud and having a secretary write it down. Additionally, it was written to appeal to the ear and would have been **presented orally** to the congregation. The literacy rate of first-century Greece was likely no more than 10%.⁴
- Paul's letter to the Corinthians makes clear that Paul cares deeply about both **right living** and **right thinking**.

¹ This reading guide was prepared by Rachel Vaughn and Dawn Gentry.

² Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 36.

³ For a likely listing of Paul's letters by date, see <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/intro/?search=Romans&version=NCB>

⁴ <https://historydisclosure.com/what-was-the-literacy-rate-in-ancient-greece/>

Historical & Cultural Context:⁵

Julius Caesar rebuilt the city of Corinth as a Roman colony in 44 BC. Corinth was the capital city of its region and important in four primary ways. First, it was a financially significant and prosperous trade route between the Aegean Sea and the Gulf of Corinth with major manufacturing interests. Second, the residents were culturally diverse and included retired Roman military and displaced Jews in addition to native Greeks. Third, it served as a major tourist destination, hosting the Isthmian games which were second in popularity to the Olympics. Finally, religious pluralism was rampant; pilgrims often visited the temple of Aphrodite, Romans adopted Greek gods into their own worship practices, and many pagan celebrations included sexual promiscuity.

Some of these influences can be noticed behind the problems Paul addresses. Various social strata lived within an honor-shame culture where haves and have-nots wrestled for recognition. Religious pluralism led to lax moral attitudes toward sexual practice.

Corinth is on an isthmus in the region of Achaia; you can view a map [here](#).

Characters: (See also Acts 18)

- **Chloe:** (1:11) A likely host of one of the house-churches in Corinth.
- **Titius Justus** (Acts 18:7) Gentile convert that housed Paul in Corinth.
- **Apollos** (16:12, Acts 18:24-28) An Egyptian Jew who taught about Jesus under the guidance of Priscilla and Aquila.
- **Priscilla (Prisca) and Aquila:** (16:19, Romans 16:3-4, Acts 18:2) Husband and wife missionary-teachers who hosted a house church.
- **Achaicus, Fortunatus, and Stephanas:** (16:17, 1:16, 16:15) Early converts in Corinth, and possibly carriers of news from “Chloe’s household.”
- **Crispus & Gaius** (1:14, Acts 18:8, Romans 16:23) Crispus was a Jewish convert and the leader of the synagogue in Corinth. Gaius housed Paul on subsequent trips to Corinth.

Purpose:⁶

As Paul addresses issues within the Corinthian church, he gives us a glimpse of what he believed was most vital for the **health of the body** and the **furthering of the gospel**. These purposes include:

- Building up the church body – 3:9-17; 8:1-3; 14:1-5, 12, 23-26
- Love in word and deed – 4:21; 8:1-3; 13; 14:1; 16:13-14, 22.
- Unity, diversity, mutuality – 7:5; 11:8-9, 11-12; 12:3-7, 12-14, 18-27
- Personal sacrifice (giving up one’s rights) for the sake of the gospel – 6:4-7; 8:9-13; 9:12, 19-23; 10:23-11:1; 14:23-25⁷

Themes:⁸

- Divisions in the Church (1-3)
- Healthy Sexuality (4-7)
- Food and Freedoms (8-10)
- The Worship Gathering (11-14)
- The Resurrection (15)

⁵ Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, Introduction.

⁶ Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*.

⁷ In other Pauline texts, look for the phrase “so that all may be saved.”

⁸ Bailey, *Paul through Mediterranean Eyes*. See also the Bible Project *Guide to 1st Corinthians*.

Reading Plan (Sequential):

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Week 1	1 Cor 1	1 Cor 2	1 Cor 3	1 Cor 4	Hebrews 6
Week 2	1 Cor 5	1 Cor 6	1 Cor 7	1 Cor 8	Malachi 2:10-16
Week 3	1 Cor 9	1 Cor 10	1 Cor 11	1 Cor 12	Romans 14
Week 4	1 Cor 13	1 Cor 14	1 Cor 15	1 Cor 16	Ezekiel 37

Reading Plan (Themes):

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
Week 1	1 Cor 1-3	1 Cor 1	1 Cor 2	1 Cor 3	Isaiah 61
Week 2	1 Cor 4-7	1 Cor 4	1 Cor 5-6	1 Cor 7	Malachi 2:10-16
Week 3	1 Cor 8-10	1 Cor 8	1 Cor 9	1 Cor 10	Galatians 5
Week 4	1 Cor 11-14	1 Cor 11	1 Cor 12-13	1 Cor 14	Isaiah 45:14-25
Week 5	1 Cor 15-16	1 Cor 15:1-34	1 Cor 15:35-58	1 Cor 16	Ezekiel 37
Week 6	1 Cor 1-3	1 Cor 4-7	1 Cor 8-10	1 Cor 11-14	1 Cor 15-16

Questions to ask as you read:

- What does this passage teach me about Jesus and what he wants for his church?
- What does this passage tell me about the church in Corinth? How does it compare/contrast with the church today?
- How does this passage expand what it means to follow Jesus every day of my life?
- What am I doing to build up the body of Christ? What areas of my life might prevent someone from knowing Jesus?

Questions to discuss with a group:

- What did you learn about God?
- How does our responsibility as individuals affect the church's corporate responsibility? How can we stay true to God's law without preventing others from coming to know him?
- What does it mean to sacrifice ourselves for the good of the whole? How does that contradict our current culture?
- What gifts do we see in each other that can be used to build up the body of Christ?

To Learn More:

- Bible Project Videos: Guide to 1st Corinthians: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/1-corinthians/>; on the genre of 1st Corinthians: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/new-testament-letters-epistles-historical-context/> and <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/new-testament-letters-literary-context/>
- Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1-2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).
- Kenneth E Bailey, *Paul through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011).
- Anthony C. Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006, 2011).