

1 Corinthians 1A (2013)

- Corinth was a mixture of New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas in the ancient world
 - It sat on the isthmus of Corinth, a narrow strip of land that connected northern Greece with the southern Peloponnesus
 - It was a crossroads of the ancient world
 - And it was a land bridge with two coastal ports
 - The city's ports connected the western Mediterranean with the Aegean Sea in the East
 - These ports were the basis for commerce in the city
 - Boats were off loaded, cargo transported over land
 - Smaller boats moved entirely
 - Later a canal was dug, started by Nero and finished in 1893
- As those boats arrived, they brought sailors
 - Sailors brought pagan traditions and vice of all kinds
 - Aristophanes in 400BC coined the phrase *korinthiazō*, which means to act like a Corinthian, as in to fornicate
 - Perhaps the most licentious city in the Roman Empire
 - The city was also incredibly wealthy due to the trade there
 - Another popular phrase was "not everyone can go to Corinth"
 - Which meant not everyone was wealthy enough to live in the city
 - Finally, the city was a center for worship of Apollo at the Temple of Aphrodite
 - The temple was manned by the prostitutes of Aphrodite
 - This is why the city was a favorite for men who wished to "worship"

- You can't overestimate how pervasive sexual perversion was in this city
- It was the original Sin City
- Paul has an extensive relationship with the city
 - Paul first traveled to Corinth in about AD 51 (less than 20 years after Christ's death)
 - This was the first major church Paul established in the Greek world
 - As was his practice, Paul initially went to the synagogue, but was soon rejected
 - So then he went to the house next door and reached his first Gentile convert, and from there began the Corinthian church
 - There he met Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18)
 - And lived among them for 18 months in his first visit
 - At that point, Paul left for Ephesus taking Priscilla and Aquila with him
- Later in about AD 54, Paul hears disturbing news about the church in Corinth
 - In particular, the church is engaging in many of the immoralities of the surrounding culture, and polluting church practice and doctrine
 - Remember, none of the four gospels have been written and distributed by this time
 - Virtually none of the letters of the New Testament have been authored
 - The church has the Old Testament and the teaching of Paul and its other leaders
 - So in the absence of such grounding and discipleship, the church was highly susceptible to wrong teaching and unhealthy practices
 - What kind of bizarre practices would invade our church were it not for the word of God?
 - In fact, we do see exactly the same tendency in the church today

- Where the word of God and the doctrines of the church are not taught, the practices of the faithful quickly begin to deviate and become corrupted
- So in AD 54 Paul writes his first letter to the city warning about vice and immoral conduct
 - That letter no longer exists (1 Corinthians 5:9)
 - But it must have begun the discussion of how the church was to correct these practices
- Later Paul hears of factions developing within the church
 - And he receives a letter from the church asking him to settle some disagreements (7:1)
 - The disagreements revolve around how the church should practice marriage, divorce, idols, spiritual gifts, giving to the poor in the church and other issues
 - The delegation carrying the letter to Paul (headed by a man named Stephanus) elaborated on the problems in the church
- So about AD 56, Paul writes his second letter to Corinth to address the things he's heard and to answer the questions posed to him in their letter
 - That second letter from Paul is the one we hold in our hands, the letter we call First Corinthians
 - In this letter, Paul says he knows there are those in the church who have disputed Paul's teaching and are claiming equal authority with Paul
 - And it was because of these false teachers that many of the disputes and bad behavior had developed in the church
 - Since there is no written New Testament scripture at this point, this church had only Paul's word as an Apostle to guide them
 - Furthermore, this is a Gentile church, made up of former Greek Pagan worshippers with no prior experience in Jewish teaching or practice
 - So they had no background in the teachings of the Old Testament and no written guidance for New Testament practice

- The conduct and future direction of this church depended on whose counsel and direction they held as authoritative
 - This is why Paul's ability to perform miracles and prove his authority by the Holy Spirit was so important
 - Paul could back up his teaching with real spiritual power, which he received from Jesus directly
 - And in this letter we'll see Paul demand that his detractors do the same
- Finally, Paul later made a "painful visit" (as he called it) to Corinth in AD 58, probably because his letter hadn't succeeded in correcting their sin
 - It was during his second stay in the city that Paul sat down to write Romans
 - I wonder if seeing Corinth running wild gave Paul the inspiration to write such a powerful letter of theology
 - As he came to understand how essential good doctrine is to the conduct of godly church life
 - That is a truth that has been set aside in many churches again today
- That is the central theme of the letter: how to live out a godly (spiritual) life
 - If Romans can be considered the preeminent letter on Christian theology
 - Then 1 Corinthians is the New Testament's principle letter for the pastoral application of theology in everyday church life
 - This is a letter that demonstrates how important theology is to the proper conduct of Christian life, particularly the life of the gathering
 - The letter reads with two discrete sections:
 - First, Chapters 1-6 addresses all Paul has heard about the goings on in the church
 - The factions
 - The false human wisdom

- The carnal conditions
- The lack of order and discipline and respect for the Apostles' authority
- The second section in Chapters 7-16 is where Paul answers the questions posed in the letter he received
 - This explains why the letter reads a little like a laundry list of issues
 - Less doctrine, more practice
- Therefore, this letter is utterly contemporary and highly applicable to our day
 - The same issues Paul addressed in Corinth continue to weigh on the church today
 - The celebrity status of church leaders and the factions that develop around them?
 - The manner and source of our salvation?
 - Divorce and remarriage?
 - Confusion over the purpose and use of spiritual gifts?
 - The integration of the pagan practices in the church?
 - The role and place of women in the church?
 - This letter written nearly 2,000 years ago, may as well have been written yesterday!

1Cor. 1:1 Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother,

1Cor. 1:2 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours:

1Cor. 1:3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

- Immediately in the opening of the letter, we see the issue of authority taking the center stage
 - Paul reminds the church of the source of his authority

- As an apostle, Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles, a man whose word and teaching carried real authority for the church
- “Apostle” was and still is a unique title in the church
- Men cannot assign this title to themselves or one another
- Only the Lord Jesus Christ may appoint an apostle, as demonstrated here by Paul’s statement
 - Paul was called to be an apostle by the will of God
 - This office is so special and unique in the church that only God may appoint this position directly
 - And He did so through His Son, Jesus Christ
 - The office of apostle was awarded only through a personal appearing of Jesus Christ
 - And the office carried special and unique signs and powers, which validated someone’s claim to being an apostle
- In 2 Corinthians 12:12, Paul mentions that he performed the signs of a true apostle when he visited the church
 - We see accounts of apostles performing these signs elsewhere in scripture, particularly in Acts, including raising men from the dead, healing and even bringing men to death
 - But today in the church, we do not have true apostles
 - The office ended when the last of the 12 died, for the office had met its purpose in establishing the church
- Secondly, Paul says the believers in Corinth were likewise called by Christ into the faith they shared
 - This concept, that we are in faith by an act of God and not an act of men, is Paul’s first line of defense against the false teachers in Corinth
 - Paul wanted the church to understand that they did not owe their salvation to any teacher or even to an apostle
 - And they certainly couldn’t credit their own wisdom and intellect as the source of their salvation

- Instead, they were called by Jesus Christ, and the rest of the first and second chapters will develop this point further

[1Cor. 1:4](#) I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus,

[1Cor. 1:5](#) that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge,

[1Cor. 1:6](#) even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you,

[1Cor. 1:7](#) so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

[1Cor. 1:8](#) who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[1Cor. 1:9](#) God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

- As is typical for Paul, he moves out of his salutation and directly into a prayer of thanks for the Corinthian church
 - This church was the first Greek church Paul planted after working his way through Asia Minor
 - Before reaching Corinth, Paul had spent some time preaching in Athens
 - But as you may know from Acts, Paul failed to gain much of a following in Athens
 - He must have left that city in a bit of despair and discouragement
 - But when he arrived in Corinth, he was met with an almost immediate Gentile response
 - In the 18 months Paul lived in Corinth, he saw many come to the Lord
 - This must have been a tremendous encouragement to Paul
 - Especially in a city of so much immorality
 - Paul's experience in moving from a fruitless Athens to a fruitful Corinth reminds us that our evangelism results lie entirely in God's hands
 - It's clear that Paul made equal effort in both cities
 - And in God's eternal purpose, it was necessary that Paul visit both places

- Yet it's also clear that in God's eternal purpose, Paul was intended to see meager response in one city but great response in the other
 - Had Paul stubbornly remained in Athens, assuming he could overcome their objections and eventually achieve results, he would have been working against the purposes of God
 - No man can turn meager response into great response in his own power
 - If we persist in laboring outside God's will, we increase our own frustration and discouragement
 - And we may miss the opportunity to reach people in the city down the road
- Paul walked in the Spirit, moving from Athens to Corinth so that he could labor in the field God had prepared for him
 - Look at how Paul entered the city

[Acts 18:8](#) Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.

[Acts 18:9](#) And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent;

[Acts 18:10](#) for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city."

- God told Paul that he had many friends in this city after only one household had been converted
- In other words, God already intended to bring Paul a great harvest, and the Lord described these future converts as if they were already believing
 - Because in light of God's sovereignty, they were
 - All that was left was for Paul to reach them, and that was the Lord's calling for Paul
- In Paul's statements of thanks, we can also see the beginnings of his first concern for this church
 - Paul says that this church already had everything they could hope to receive from their faith in Christ

- First, and foremost, they had received God's unmerited favor in Jesus Christ
 - This is the basis for every good thing that would follow
 - Without having received grace through faith in Christ, no other benefit of the Body of Christ is available
- Secondly, they were made rich in Jesus Christ
 - Not just in the sense of our eternal inheritance
 - But also in speech and knowledge
 - The believer has access to all the wisdom of God and the ability to carry that truth to the world in a powerful way
 - Just as the Gospel testimony Paul delivered to them worked powerfully to convert Corinth
- Thirdly, the church in Corinth was not lacking in any spiritual gift
 - The Spirit was alive in the church and with Him comes access to every spiritual gift
- Finally, they have the assurance of their salvation and the glory to come
 - The church could be assured that they will be blameless in the end when they stand before Jesus Christ
 - Nothing else was required for the church to receive all these blessings...everything Paul listed was theirs already by virtue of grace alone
- Why has Paul started his letter in this way? Because the church was showing evidence they did not understand what they had obtained through faith alone
 - The believers in Corinth were products of their culture, just as every believer is a product of his or her own culture
 - Corinth was quintessentially Greek: priding itself on its wealth, wisdom, sophistication and oratory
 - And so the church in Corinth reflected those prideful qualities

- When the faith first arrived in the city, the new converts were equals in Christ
- But soon they began to compare themselves to one another seeking ways to re-establish rank and privilege
- Because this was the way of the Greek culture
- But the shame was that their pride was actually causing them to stumble so that they were less than they should be
 - They valued wisdom and knowledge
 - They admired eloquence in speech
 - They respected wealth and prestige, as did all Greek culture
 - But Paul says they have already obtained everything in these areas by their faith in Christ
 - No one was superior to another
 - And they need not seek for something greater than they have already obtained in Christ
- In their searching for greater prestige and honor, the church had begun to find it by association
 - They had begun to argue for a greater honor on the basis of who converted them
 - Ironically, they had lost sight of who they truly were in Greek culture
 - While they argued for who had greater honor and chased after greater forms of wisdom, they neglected to notice how the rest of the Greek society viewed the church
 - So now Paul begins to address the first serious problem in the Corinthians church life: their desire to create factions and credit themselves by association

1Cor. 1:10 Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.

1Cor. 1:11 For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you.

[1Cor. 1:12](#) Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ."

[1Cor. 1:13](#) Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

[1Cor. 1:14](#) I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,

[1Cor. 1:15](#) so that no one would say you were baptized in my name.

[1Cor. 1:16](#) Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other.

- Paul begins with the first thing he's heard – there are dissensions and factions
 - And as Paul begins to correct them, he reminds them of his authority to correct them while describing the sin in the church
 - Paul says these things to bring them to shame
 - But then he will offer a correction
 - And he will end with an encouraging word to move them ahead in the right manner
 - This is the pattern Paul will follow throughout the letter
- Paul says that all in the church should agree and that there be no divisions
 - The word in Greek (autos) means to be one-minded
 - Paul is insisting the church operate as one, not as divisions
 - And he says they are to be complete, in the same mind and judgment
 - The word complete (*katartizo*) means to mend, as in to mend nets (Mark 1:19)
 - The church should be knitted together, not pulling apart
 - The split in the Corinthian church was the result of church members aligning themselves with certain leaders
 - The members of each group began to hold that their status in the body – and even their salvation itself – was determined on the basis of these affiliations
 - Specifically, they began to claim they were "of Paul" or "of Apollos" or "of Cephas"

- Looking at these three men, we know each was important in his own way
 - Paul was the founder of the church
 - Apollos was a gifted orator who also evangelized the Greek world
 - Peter was the founder of the Jewish church
 - Peter never visited Corinth as far as we know
 - But some Jewish believers had probably migrated into the city
- In correcting the church, Paul asks can Christ be divided?
 - Obviously not – Christ’s literal body could not be divided into parts
 - Neither can the spiritual Body of Christ be divided
 - For we are all one by the same Spirit Who indwells us all
 - But the Corinthian church was now placing an emphasis on their affiliation with a certain apostle more than with their identity in Christ
 - Paul demands that the church avoid these divisions, but when Paul says to agree, he doesn’t mean that the church can’t have disagreements
 - Paul didn’t want division, but that doesn’t mean he wished the church would compromise on the truth
 - In fact, disagreements are inevitable when the truth of God’s word is at stake
 - There do come times when we must stand up for the truth
 - Notice in v.12 there were some saying they are “of Christ”
 - This was the correct viewpoint
 - These Christians were saying the correct thing, the same thing Paul himself is about to teach
 - But because others had established incorrect thinking, a division between right and wrong had developed in the church
 - Here we see how theological error creates division in the church

- The division begins when some in the church leave the truth and begin teaching error
- Then those who hold to the truth are forced to be divided
- We cannot reconcile truth and error
- The solution to division in the church has always been the same: sound doctrine and sound teaching
 - When the church emphasizes correct Bible teaching, then the Body as a whole can grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ
 - But when teaching and sound doctrine are lost, division arises
 - For his part, Paul says he did nothing to encourage these divisions
 - Paul asks, was he the one who died on the cross?
 - Were they baptized in the name of Paul?
 - Paul didn't teach that he was central to faith and salvation
 - He taught that Christ was central
 - Paul adds that he was thankful he didn't baptize many because he didn't want to encourage this nonsense
 - This is an important principle for the church then and today
 - Pastors, teachers, evangelists should never encourage their audiences to see themselves as attached or aligned with the individual
 - Our only identity is in Christ
 - In the end, we must be careful not to repeat the mistake of the Corinthian church
 - And as members of the Body, we should take every opportunity, (short of compromising on the truth) to reconcile divisions in the church
 - We are not Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists
 - We are not conservative or charismatic
 - We are not reformed or dispensational

- We are Christians or we are not