

AP 39

1 Corinthians / Προς Κορινθίους Α / Pros Korinthious A To The Corinthians, First

When I first came to faith, I imagined I could find a church that looked like and acted like the “first century church”. A church that I/we imagined was common in the first century, but rare today. *Clearly, I/we had not yet read First Corinthians*, for in this letter you find a fully dysfunctional, coming-off-the-rails, first century church. A church that was powerful and gifted, but completely unhealthy. I think what we really wanted back in Fort Worth was an Acts 2 church (this glorious initial period of church life only lasted 2 chapters in Acts – by Acts 5 some squirrely things were happening). We wanted the honeymoon, not the marriage. This is a fantasy that many still embrace.

At the time this letter was written, Corinth was *the* hopping town of Greece. Corinth was Greece’s New York – the center of commerce and fashion and entertainment. Athens is better described as Greece’s Boston. You get the sense that the church at Corinth had no lack of strongly opinionated, driven, Type A personalities, who only played to win.

When you read First Corinthians you can almost hear Paul’s frustration and exasperation, seeping out of the ink of the letter. Paul, who usually has a really uplifting first chapter, picks up the issue of conflict after just 9 verses. To some extent 1 Corinthians reads like a laundry list of issues¹, that Paul speaks to, one after the other.

If you want leadership debated go to chapter 1, if you want the content of the gospel clarified just turn the page and enjoy chapters 1-4. For rank immorality turn to chapter 5. For believers suing each other chapter 6. By chapter 11 we are talking appropriate hairstyles. I trust you see the pattern, fire after fire is dealt with through correspondence. The church at Corinth was rotting from within, and this is Paul and? Sosthenes is conducting an intervention.

We are often surprised, shocked by churches in conflict. I think First Corinthians may be in the Bible to remind us Churches behaving badly is not really that rare and certainly not new. It’s an incredible window into real church life in that first century.²

As you read scripture, do you find yourself surprised at how much dirty laundry is allowed into the inspired word of God? The Bible is not apparently a marketing puff piece encouraging you to follow Christ so all will go well. I am sure 1 Corinthians is a bit embarrassing to some, just as our book from last week was - Song of Solomon. The Bible is a real book, telling a real story.

Another thing to notice is Paul was not successful, or at least not completely successful as there was a need for 2 Corinthians to be written.

¹ Check out 7:1 and compare it with 8:1 and 12:1 for this laundry list feel.

² Galatians (Paul) and the letters to the seven churches at the beginning of the book of Revelation (John) provide equally fascinating glimpses.

Sunday, Aug 21

1 Corinthians 1 The footnotes are important today

For Reflection: In this chapter we see two critical issues for the church of Corinth. 1) Divisions within the church based on which particular leader/pastor each individual or group is aligned with. 2) The influence incipient gnostic philosophical culture³ upon the church.⁴ The Second issue continues to be a concern throughout the initial 4 chapters. Nerd alert!!! Big philosophical question coming!!! *What generally accepted philosophical mindsets of our culture threaten to dilute the gospel?* Secularism? Radical Individualism? Racism? Pluralism? Consumerism? Materialism? Capitalism? Hedonism? Cancel-ism?⁵

Lagniappe: 1 Corinthians 2:2 - a little pre reading for tomorrow

Monday, Aug 22

1 Corinthians 2

For Reflection: We again see Paul fighting for the gospel, God was really a man, really died, really material. And Paul's defending his apostleship based in divine power not human wisdom. The gospel is a wisdom secret and hidden (7) not in the sense it is difficult to obtain, but in the sense that it is it surprising and shocking to Jews and Greeks – stumbling block or foolishness (1:23 2;12). *What does it mean to have the mind of Christ? How does the mind of Christ affect or inform the things you hope to accomplish or experience this week?*

Lagniappe: Philippians 2:5

³ Sorry for this long note, but 1 Corinthians is a bit weird if you ignore the intellectual context. Gnostic teaching, which didn't coalesce into a system of thought until about a half century later, was highly dualistic and highly antisemitic. The dominant dualism (think no shades of grey) in Gnosticism was between the material (Bad) and the spiritual (Good). So, the flesh was disdained as weak or evil. Which means a creator God (Judeo/Christian – a God who creates a material world) or an incarnate God (Christian – God coming in the/our flesh – e.g. John 1:14) are not going to fly – these are central beliefs for orthodox Christianity. That a God could/would/should die, that is be crucified, was particularly offensive to Greeks of a gnostic persuasion. Therefore, Paul writes the "cross is foolishness to the Greeks" (1:23). Paul gives a rousing defense of the gospel and the essential place of the cross. Gnosticism was a proud, elitist philosophy, so Paul writes 1:28. These special philosophical/religious had special (hard to get) spiritual knowledge - Knowledge = *Gnosis*, Wisdom-*Sophia*. When you the author just speaking *their* language to connect (Paul does this a lot especially in comparing life in the flesh versus life in the Spirit – e.g. Romans 8) or is the author distinguishing Christianity from Gnosticism, as here.

⁴ The two major threats to Christianity that we read about in the epistles are 1) a return to Jewish law-keeping (Legalism) and 2) incipient Gnosticism. You see these threats moving the pens of New Testament authors in many passages throughout the epistles.

⁵ Leslie Newbiggin. A pretty smart dude – Thought of powers and principalities (demons - e.g. Eph 6:12) as the "isms" of today. When any concern becomes an ism that concern often becomes our Lord, you might even say we are possessed by it. That's a perspective worth noodling on a bit.

Tuesday, Aug 23

1 Corinthians 3⁶

For Reflection: In this chapter you continue to see Paul addressing the disputes about power and leadership⁷, but also notice whenever Paul uses the words “spiritual” or “wisdom”, he is contrasting the Gospel with incipient Gnosticism (an elitist heresy that ultimately denies the humanity of Christ and the goodness of creation). He’s snarky, but as founder of the church he’s earned the right. Paul attempts to move the Corinthians from debating, “Who is their preferred leader?” to answering a far more important question, “Who is their foundation?” For Paul the foundation of Faith is Jesus Christ and Christ alone (crucified /incarnate = off-putting to Gnostics). (vs 6-7) *Where are you seeing God-caused growth in your personal life, and in your church’s life? Or (vs 11) Based on time usage, financial commitments, ministry/activity focus, and mindset what or who is your personal foundation? What is your church’s foundation?*

Lagniappe: Psalm 115:1

Wednesday, Aug 24 1 Corinthians 5

For Reflection: This is just a weird situation, there is a publicly known extreme moral deviancy in the church, which is neither accepted in the Christian culture **or** the Roman culture (vs 1). Worse yet the church isn’t just ignoring it, the church is boasting (vs 6) about its tolerance and love. The church has always struggled with judging sins out in culture, while ignoring (in this case celebrating) the sins within the church. Individual believers have experienced the same struggle – we would much rather focus on a sin with which we don’t struggle, than a sin with which we do struggle. *What sin (in your life) are you ignoring or even celebrating? (vs. 6) When have you seen sin become infectious?*

Lagniappe: Matthew 7:1-5

Thursday, Aug 25 1 Corinthians 12

For Reflection: The Gifts of the Spirit serve as the thread that weaves chapter 12-14 together, 3 chapters on spiritual gifts is a lot! Yet, it shouldn’t surprise us that in a church highly influenced by a Gnostic intellectual climate (which, emphasizes the spiritual over the material) that anything of a spiritual nature would serve

⁶ It’s important to note that in vss. 16-17 the pronouns are plural, they refers to the church not to individuals. This is also true in chapter 6. I almost always here these verses quoted in reference to **personal** purity but they are about **church** faithfulness to Christ (Chp. 3) and **church** purity (Chp. 6).

⁷ Paul does not consider these quarrels as petty (see vs. 17)

as a lightening rod of interest. Given vss 14-26, it seems as though elitism (a trait of Gnosticism) is occurring in the church with respect to spiritual gifts or the lack of them. In this chapter the church is compared to a body, every organ and limb needed for proper functioning of the whole. *In what ways is the church still like a body, and not like a body?* There are multiple lists in the NT of spiritual gifts, since the lists are different, no list is considered definitive. *What gift(s) has the Spirit given you to share with the church and the world? Where or how are you sharing it?*

Lagniappe: Isaiah 44:3

Friday, Aug 26

1 Corinthians 13

For Reflection: *How does the virtue of love connect with the presence of Spiritual gifts?* Paul's famous description of love presents love as an exercise of the will (a verb / a choice), rather than a natural outpouring of emotion or sentiment (a noun / an uncontrolled experience) *When your children or friends consider the nature of love do they more commonly view it as an emotion, or as a choice? Where or how do we learn to love this (Paul's) way?*

Lagniappe: 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3

Saturday, Aug 27

1 Corinthians 15

For Reflection: Finally, the last area of concern in which the intellectual culture of Corinth/Greece is attempting to eclipse or reshape the Gospel. The theme for this chapter is bodily resurrection of Jesus and its implications – as we see presented in the gospels: the body of Christ (which according to Gnosticism is evil) is not left in the grave like a pile of cloths that clothed the spirit (which is good) for a time. Some readers point to this chapter as one of the first clear summations of the Gospel/Good News. (particularly vss 1-11). *How would you define the gospel, the good news in 2 or 3 sentences?*

Lagniappe: Romans 1:16-17. (Another clear summation)