



An Introduction...

Paul had visited the city of Corinth and planted a church there around AD 49. It was a strategically located city. It's positioned on the narrow four-mile isthmus that separates northern and southern Greece. It had been destroyed by Rome in 146 BC only to be rebuilt about a hundred years later by Julius Caesar as a Roman colony and it became the capital of the province of Achaia. Because of its location, it rapidly became a major centre of trade and a thriving, wealthy city. And as always happens when cities are located on major trade routes and where economic opportunity abounds, it attracted people from all over the world. It was a vast melting pot of cultures, all of which, of course, made it a place of stark, social contrasts. Writing sometime after Paul's stay in this city, for example, one ancient visitor to Corinth said that "the sordidness of the rich and the misery of the poor were extraordinary." He said it was a place, "abounding in luxuries but inhabited by an ungracious people." It was a city noted for its immorality and its debauchery. The great temple of Aphrodite was located on the top of a hill overlooking the city where thousands of temple prostitutes worked there as priestesses and below it, there was the temple of Apollo which celebrated homosexuality. In time, to "Corinthianize" became a synonym for adultery and sexual perversity of every kind. But it was here, into this dark and cosmopolitan city, that the apostle Paul resolved to plant a church, which he did, Acts 18 tells us, with the help of Priscilla and Aquila.

Now when Paul left the city about a year and a half later, he spent the next three years ministering in the city of Ephesus and while he was in Ephesus he began to hear that not all was well back in Corinth. The allure of the surrounding culture continued to pull at these young believers. Sharp divisions began to emerge. Sexual sin continued to be a struggle and the oddities of pagan philosophy and the mystery cults began to creep into the teaching of some people in the churches. Paul's letter to them is designed to address each of those problems very directly indeed. Many of the issues facing the believers in Corinth characterize the struggles facing Christians today as we wrestle with the call of Jesus Christ to be holy while the old life pulls at us and draws us back into the sinful patterns of the world.

But what we are going to see as the apostle Paul addresses them over and over again, is that he does not respond to the Corinthians with angry rebuke or with a series of "how-to" instructions for living a victorious Christian life. Instead, 1 Corinthians points these relatively new Christians back to fundamental truths about God and the Gospel of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. As you read through 1 Corinthians, notice how no matter the complexity or the intractability of the problem, again and again, Paul's answer is essentially really very basic. It is knowing God

revealed in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. That's it— grasping and learning to apply with ever increasing clarity and courage the Gospel of God's saving grace for sinners in Jesus to all the details of our lives. That's his response to every problem the Corinthians are dealing with. Paul's agenda in this letter, in other words— and if we'll allow God's Word to do its work in our lives, God's agenda for us as we read 1 Corinthians together in the weeks ahead— is to strip out all the old, tangled, confused wiring of the world and to re-wire our spiritual systems entirely with this simple, clear truth of the good news about Jesus Christ.

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