

# NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

## *Lesson 39*

### I Corinthians – Part One Overview

In 1 Corinthians, we have the longest of Paul's letters. At the time, Corinth was the largest city in Greece. In this letter, there is a good deal of teaching in the areas of doctrine, morality and behavior, and church relationships. This first lesson will give a basic overview. Subsequent classes will look at Paul's teachings in a bit more detail.

#### **I. BACKGROUND**

While Paul was at Ephesus on what we call his Third Missionary Journey (Acts 19), Paul traded letters with the church at Corinth. This church was the one Paul started while on his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 18). We are aware of this church beginning by some of the statements in the letter itself. In 1 Corinthians 5:9-11, Paul compares what he had already written in an earlier letter with what he was writing in the current letter. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 7:1, Paul references matters the Corinthians had written about to him.

In addition to exchanging correspondence, the letter is clear that certain folks traveled back and forth between Paul and the church with various reports and information. In chapter 1 verse 11, Paul speaks of information he received from some in Chloe's household. In 11:18, Paul speaks about various things he had heard about the way the Corinthians were honoring the Lord's Supper.

We know from Acts 18 that Apollos made a trip from Ephesus to Corinth prior to Paul's arrival at Ephesus. Apollos returned to Ephesus and, no doubt, was one of Paul's sources of information about the church's actions. We know this fact because Paul tells the Corinthians in 16:12 that Paul was urging Apollos to return to Corinth, even though Apollos did not want to go.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising that Apollos would not want to return. Paul was writing to correct, among other things, the partisanship that had arisen in the church. Some in the church were factionalizing into followers of Paul or followers of Apollos (1:12; 3:4-6). Apollos was not about building an individual fan club or following; neither was Paul. Both wanted Jesus proclaimed as Messiah and Lord. That Paul would urge Apollos to go in spite of the factions indicates the deep trust Paul had for Apollos's ministry and teaching.

Although Paul did not have the wonderful literary invention of quotation marks to help us in reading the letter, we are still able to discern (sometimes by context and sometimes by reference) that Paul at times is quoting the Corinthians in an effort to respond to them. So, when we read Paul saying, “It is good for a man not to marry” (7:1), we will need to read the first part of the verse where Paul first writes, “Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry.” That style lets us know that we may not assume Paul is the one saying, “It is good for a man not to marry.” Apparently, this is what the Corinthians wrote to Paul that Paul is responding to in his next few verses.

Similarly, most scholars agree that when Paul writes, “Everything is permissible for me” in 5:12, Paul is quoting what the Corinthians were saying, followed by Paul’s response “but not everything is beneficial” (5:12). This style is why the N.I.V. translators put the “Everything is permissible for me” in quotation marks.

## **II. CORINTH**

We covered a little about Corinth when we studied Acts 18 and Paul’s initial work in the city. At this point, however, it is useful to refresh what we covered and go into a bit more detail. Much of what we can learn about the city gives us additional insight into Paul’s letter and the situation that was present.

Corinth was both an old city and a new city. For hundreds of years, Corinth was a prosperous town that was significant in Greek history. Because it was situated on a peculiar isthmus, Corinth had basically two seaports separated by a four-mile track – one that headed across to Italy on the west and another that headed to Asia on the east. This double seaport made Corinth a major trade route that generated a good bit of income for the locals. Corinth was considered a “rich” town.

As a busy navy/seaport town, Corinth was also center for quite a bit of sexual decadence. From as early as 400 B.C., the Greek language had a verb “to corinthianize” which meant “to fornicate.” Both sexual laxity and money had an effect on the ethics and values not only of the community in general, but also for those in the church. We will read that a portion of the church looked down on Paul as a man without wealth. Similarly, there was sexual indulgence in the church that Paul correctly pointed out was WAY out of bounds. Paul takes not only the actors in the deviance to task, but he also takes the church itself to task for a permissive attitude to the sin.

Corinth was also home to the “Isthmus Games.” These games were second only to the Olympics in terms of importance. They were held in Corinth every two years, and all Greek city-states participated. It was no accident that Paul would use the example in his writings of going into strict training to prepare for competing in the games (9:24-27).

In addition to its long history, Corinth was also a relatively new city. In 146 B.C., a Roman army totally destroyed Corinth for its part in assisting an unsuccessful revolt against Rome. Julius Caesar re-founded the city in 44 B.C., and within 15 years, Corinth became the seat of government for Rome on the Achaian peninsula. As noted earlier, when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, the city was the largest and wealthiest in Greece.

We know that there was a population of Jews in Corinth both from the Bible and from archaeology. Acts 18 tells us that Paul went to the synagogue, which meant a presence of at least 10 Jewish men. Archaeology has found an engraved marker that served as a lintel to a door in Corinth. The marker read “Synagogue of the Jews.”

### **III. THE CHURCH SINCE PAUL LEFT**

We also have a bit of information on some specific things that occurred at the church since Paul had left. As already covered, we know that Apollos visited and taught here. It is also apparent from 1 Corinthians that Peter had visited as well. Paul speaks of Peter as “Cephas,” which was his Greek name in several places (1:12; 3:22; 9:5<sup>2</sup>). The Corinthians used these other teachers wrongly to allow the factionalizing discussed earlier in this lesson.

Because of what was happening in the church, Paul had a number of issues that prompted his writing. As discussed in the Galatians lesson, scholars use the word “occasion” when discussing this action. The “occasion” for 1 Corinthians was to correct a number of problems within the church. The occasion was more than correcting these problems, however. In addition to the problems, there were a number in the church that were minimizing Paul, if not outright slandering him. Paul writes in a way that defends himself and his ministry while outright challenging those who stood against him.

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<sup>2</sup> This passage in 9:5 seems to indicate that Peter visited with his wife.

We may fairly infer that some in Corinth thought Paul taught only “milk” (i.e. simplistic baby stuff) and that he did so with less than a forceful and dynamic presentation! Some saw Paul as unsuccessful because Paul worked with his hands for a living instead of receiving support from churches as a missionary (Can’t you hear some saying, “How good can Paul be if he can’t even get church support for his preaching?”).

Apparently, some also pointed out that Paul would flip flop on positions depending on whom he was around. When around Jews, Paul was like a Jew, while Paul was a Greek when around non-Jews. Of course, Paul was what Paul needed to be to teach and reach the people for Christ. Paul worked with his hands so that his message could never be associated with a quest for personal enrichment. Paul will have to make these points to the Corinthians in his own defense in the letter.

#### **IV. INDIVIDUAL PROBLEMS**

Paul addresses a number of sins that plagued a number of the Corinthians. These individual problems centered on pride and self-centeredness to some degree. Paul addresses the issues by centering the attention back onto Jesus crucified and what the import of that historical salvation event is in the Christian’s daily life. Paul will address those who considered the cross something a bit too simple and not advanced enough for their super-spiritual growth as God’s children. Paul addresses those lax in matters of sexual purity as well as those who look outside the church to enforce their “rights” against those within the church. Paul addressed the relationship of husband and wife as well as the institution of marriage itself. How and whether one might eat of food that was sacrificed to the idols of the Greek world was also a matter Paul discussed in light of the cross of Christ.

#### **V. CHURCH ISSUES**

In addition to the personal shortcomings Paul discussed, the church at Corinth was burdened by a number of different issues that were shortcomings of the church itself. Accordingly, we read Paul covering the issue of unity as opposed to the pride of competitive camps claiming superiority over each other. Paul explains the differing roles of himself and Apollos as to the church. In similar ways, Paul explains that the diversity in the church itself is not because anyone is more spiritual, wiser, or more important to God. The differences between the members actually comes from God himself because the church is to use those differences to become a united WHOLE that best glorifies God.

Paul speaks of the need of the church to take holiness among its members seriously, even disciplining extreme sinners to save their souls. Paul sets aright the Lord's Supper as holy rather than divisive. Spiritual gifts were never meant to disrupt church services; they were meant to enrich them. Similarly, spiritual gifts were never intended to set one member over another as "super-spiritual." Rather, the gifts were so one could lift another up by **serving** the other. The church was to find that the teaching above all was Christ crucified. The church was to find that the gift above all was love for each other.

## **VI. OTHER TEACHINGS**

All of Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians center on Jesus crucified. Paul is so blunt that he says, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2:1). We see throughout the letter that as Paul teaches on the gospel, he also teaches on the second coming and the glorification we have in the resurrection. Furthermore, we see it as Paul explains his role as apostle and teacher. Paul will use a number of Old Testament quotations that find their meaning as well in the crucifixion of Jesus.

Interestingly, the early Christian writers compiled a number of commentaries and sermons on the Corinthian letters. An unknown man, given the name Ambrosiaster, wrote the oldest full-length commentary. The commentary was written somewhere between 366 and 384 in Rome. The commentary itself is quite impressive, holding its own among the best commentaries written today. John Chrysostom (347-407) also wrote a verse-by-verse exposition on 1 and 2 Corinthians that has quite a bit of historical information about Corinth and the letters themselves. For example, Chrysostom wrote about the city:

Corinth is still the first city of Greece. In ancient times it prided itself on many temporal advantages, above all on its great wealth. The city was full of orators and philosophers, one of whom [Periander] was considered one of the seven wise men of his time. These things are not just ornamental details. They help us in understanding Paul's epistles (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament Volume VII, p.2).

As we look at the letter in more detail in the coming weeks, we will consider what these early church writers had to say on the subjects.

## **VII. POINTS FOR HOME**

1. Center our life on Jesus Crucified.
2. More money does mean better person.
3. Bye-bye Pride.
4. Love each other.
5. Serve each other.