

ABIDE: A BIBLE READING CHALLENGE

JOURNEY THROUGH THE NEW TESTAMENT

WHEN CULTURE CHANGES CHURCH

1 CORINTHIANS

While the book of Romans centers on Christian doctrine, the first letter to the Corinthian church centers on Christian damage control.

With a thriving, vibrant population of 700,000 people, the City of Corinth was an exciting place to start a church. The potential was massive. Corinth was one of the most important cities in all of Greece and was the very capital of the Roman province of Achaia.

They had everything. They had two seaports, major trading routes that moved from east to west so dealers and market traders could move in and out quickly with new deliveries. They had a huge shopping mall right on a center main street and they had a massive stadium that could seat thousands of people.

But there was one thing they lacked; they lacked knowledge of the Gospel.

Understand, Paul was completely strategic about where he began to plant a church. It's not that he loved the people in small communities any less, it's just that if you want to reach an entire people group, it's better to go to highly populated areas and then let that message work its way outward. In other words, to reach the big city is to reach the small communities.

However, as we pick up on the current cultural climate of the day, it was going to be some hard work. For instance, when Paul went to Thessalonica, he planted a church there in 4 weeks. In Corinth, Paul stayed at this location for a year and a half. Why? Because though it had everything going right for this city economically, it had everything going wrong with it morally. The Corinthians had commerce; the Corinthians had culture; but what they had sown into all of it was a well-known reputation for corruption. The people around the city of Corinth even had a word to describe their neighbors. If you acted in an immoral manner, or your behavior was corrupt, that person was known to be 'corinthian-ized'.

This not only had to do with the way they treated each other in business but had to do also with how they viewed sexuality. In the Greek culture, they would build the city close to a mountainous area, and this was done for two purposes. One purpose was for protection. If the city became under siege, all the people of the city would retreat to the mountain for shelter. The second reason was for worship. Near the mountaintop, they would build a temple to a pagan god they wanted to highlight. In the case of the Corinthians, it was to the Greek goddess Venus (the goddess of love). It was said that inside the temple

1,000 prostitutes worked as priestesses providing services and words of prophecy to those who came to visit them. They would force themselves into ecstatic and entranced forms of ecstasy that would cause them to speak in coded and mysterious language.

This was the pure evil and sin that was deeply embedded and entrenched in this culture, and it was threatening the existence of this very church.

What you're reading are the guidelines of what to do when the culture begins to change the church instead of the church changing the culture.

How to Think About 1 Corinthians

Apparently, this church had written to Paul first while he was ministering in Ephesus and had asked him a few questions about theological matters, and so Paul takes this opportunity to not only address these issues but to answer a few of the problems they didn't know they needed to address as well. Reports had come in from Timothy that some serious matters were happening inside of this church body, and Paul chooses to deal with this first.

With this mind, Paul divides this letter in two different ways. First, he takes time to instruct about what they needed to correct and then he answers the doctrinal questions they needed to address.

The Carnal Life (Chapter 1- Chapter 6)— In Acts 17, Dr. Luke tells us that Paul found himself in the city of Athens and it absolutely broke his heart. Given the opportunity to preach, he presented the gospel, and some believed, but in large part, Paul was made fun of and only mildly considered by the rest.

Preaching and teaching take a toll on you. If you pour your heart and soul into a person, or a group of people, get ready for some exhaustion and a heavy spiritual and emotional toll to go along with it. Sometimes you have a good time, other times it's not so good, but in either case, you're left thinking about how you could do better the next time.

We can imagine Paul with this kind of decision-making to do after leaving a heavily populated area with only a little bit of success. Is there anything that could have been done differently? Is there anything in the presentation that could be better? There were professional speakers around who were very persuasive with their words, perhaps that was the way to go in influencing people for the faith? Paul has a lot of thinking to do during his 50-mile journey north from Athens to Corinth. What would he do? Well, after he spends a year and a half there, and is writing to them now, he reminds them exactly of what he decided to do. 1 Corinthians 2:1-2 "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

Paul said that he had made up his mind. He was kicked around a little at Athens and was messing around with some ideas about how the message should be presented, and thought, "You know what? No. I'm just going to keep doing what I'm doing. I'm going to just preach Christ crucified."

But now dealing with these problems, these believers were undoing everything he had taught them and it came down to one word— carnality.

Divisions in the Church (Chapter 1- Chapter 4): Once Paul gets done with his introductions, he starts right in on the importance of preaching of the cross of Christ, which should be the main focus of any church. Then, in chapter two, Paul highlights the wisdom of God versus the wisdom of man. And once Paul establishes these basics, things that they should already know, he tells them the reason that they are not growing as they should be and why he has to give them the basics once more, and that is because they are just a bunch of carnal people. Paul gives them what they should be concerned about understanding, but instead, they were fighting about who the greatest teacher was with the greatest influence.

Discipline in the Church (Chapter 5): A problem had been handed down to Paul about a man who had been engaging in a relationship with his father's wife. Some believe that this may have been a stepmother, but whether this is the case is completely irrelevant. The fact remains that this was a gross error and people in the church were turning a blind eye toward the matter. Paul says that it is ultimately pride that keeps believers from confronting other believers, and not acceptance. Paul then tells them to take care of the matter by approaching these individuals about repentance, and if they did not repent, then they were to be removed from membership.

Difficulties in the Church (Chapter 6:1-8): These believers were taking each other to court instead of handling problems inside of the church. They were suing each other in a public court of law and the result is that they were showing the world that they were no different than anyone else.

Defilement in the Church (Chapter 6:9-20): We find that some of these believers were doing the same things in the church once they came to Christ that they were doing before they came to Christ. Paul reminds them that when someone believes the Gospel, the reason you're able to tell when your salvation is genuine is that it results in a changed life. Paul argued that the way some of them were living was a life consistent with never being saved in the first place.

The Spiritual Life (Chapters 7-16)— Here, Paul finally answers the questions that were sent to him. The way you can identify this is because of the phrase "Now as touching..." or in other words, "Now concerning..." You'll read this phrase several times in the second portion of the letter as Paul is answering specific questions.

The Christian's Marriage (Chapter 7): This chapter is complex but very beneficial when it comes to the marital life of the believer.

The Christian's Influence (Chapters 8-10): What stands out most prominently in this chapter is the problem of 'meat sacrificed unto idols'. Paul deals with the influence believers have on other believers and how to appropriately handle differences with Christian maturity.

The Christian's Worship (Chapter 11): This chapter has to do with the Christian's dress and the nature and purpose of the Lord's Supper and how it is to be conducted.

The Christian's Abilities (Chapters 12-14): Here Paul writes about the fact that each believer has been given at least one spiritual gift and that it is the Holy Spirit that administers each of these gifts. He also points out that no believer is superior to another because of the gifts they possess and that no matter how much ability God gives you. If you don't have love, then you have nothing. Paul concludes this subject in chapter 14 by correcting the purpose of the gift of tongues. It appears they were in love with outward gifts of power and so everyone wanted this gift. They would chant and cause themselves to go into extreme excited states and wouldn't you know, begin acting just like those priestesses at the temple.

The Christian's Hope (Chapter 15): Paul answers some questions about the resurrection of Jesus Christ and why this was an essential doctrine of the faith.

The Christian's Responsibility (Chapter 16): As Paul closes, he mentions to these believers about our responsibilities in giving.

What to Look for in 1 Corinthians

Doctrine— This letter is rich in doctrinal matters as Paul addresses the different issues and questions faced by this church. Much of what churches face today is no different than the problems churches have always faced. Let's look at a few of the major matters that a church should focus on as they minister to the culture around them.

A Church Should Preach Christ: It's hard to preach Christ and Him crucified when you're preaching to each other about how great you are. There is a real devil and enough evil to fight outside of the church and that fight can't happen if church members are fighting each other.

This is the most carnal church Paul writes to, and the reason is because of pride. There were so many people who wanted a foothold in prominence that they lost sight of their purpose— to preach to the world the message of Christ, and Him crucified. Some churches fill themselves up with meetings and committees, gimmicks and strategies, that they forget about the most simple and most important feature of church life—just preach Christ and Him crucified.

A Church Should Practice Discipline: Some people get hung up here and hate the fact that church discipline exists. But as it stands, we are God's representatives here on earth— His ambassadors. And it only makes sense to say that if we are His representatives, then we need to operate as He operates. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves a few questions. The first is this: Does God confront Sin? Absolutely! And if God confronts sin shouldn't His people engage in the same confrontation when a sin becomes public among a congregation that has covenanted together to honor God? Absolutely!

The second question we need to ask is: Does God forgive sin? Yes! Well in the church, we are accountable to God and God makes us accountable to each other. And when a person is confronted with sin and acknowledges that sin, then it is up to the congregation to help restore that individual.

The third question we need to ask is: Does unrepentant sin hinder our relationship with God? Absolutely! That said, when a church exercises church discipline, it isn't to point a finger of accusation. It is to say that there is some sin that you need to take care of and you haven't done it. That is why fellowship and membership are suspended in this instance. It's not to be rude. It is to explain that in a church capacity, we can't follow that person where they're going. Silence is a form of acceptance and God does not allow that as a viable option among His church.

A Church Should Protect Members: When God puts us in a church, it is our responsibility to care for the spiritual welfare of our fellow members. Further, it is their responsibility to help protect us. Paul, in his letter mentions 'meat sacrificed to idols' but says if it's going to legitimately wound someone's spiritual life to watch him do this, then he would rather protect a fellow church member and pay a few dollars more for a cut of meat.

A Church Should Provide Resources: God doesn't bless a congregation with financial resources so that we can be stingy. God blesses us so that we can be a blessing. According to this letter, a church collects money at the first of the week as God has prospered, for the express purpose of doing ministry together.

What to Gain from 1 Corinthians

A Church is to Change the Culture, Not be Changed by the Culture— It seems that some were trying to get a foothold in power. It seems that some were trying to have extra 'Church' control. It seems that some were trying to position themselves for authority. And let me ask you: where do you find that kind of behavior? The culture around us!

You find that kind of stuff in the cutthroat business world. You find those kinds of dealings between political opponents. You find maneuvering for power in the high-stakes competition between world governments. You can find power grabs all over this planet and at every level of society. You can find it at the schoolhouse, the jailhouse, the courthouse, and even the White House. But the one place you should be free from this kind of tyranny of culture is the Church house.

God's people are never to take what's normal in society and bring it inside our Churches. Power plays might be a common practice in the culture, but they can never be allowed in the Church. Separating people in groups of popular and unpopular

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might be okay in the culture, but it's never okay in the Church. Public slander and smear campaigns might be business as usual in the culture, but it can never be business as usual in the Church. Actually, it's the complete opposite. As a Church, the culture should never change us; instead, as God's people, we have the greater influence. As God's people, we have the superior moral understanding. As God's people, we have the better message! And as we leave our Churches on Sunday, it is us who should be doing the changing.

God did not create His Church with design flaws, leaving us susceptible to the ideas, norms, and power-obsessed whims of the culture around us. God created His Church to be a spiritual battleship and plow through the destructive power of the culture.

So as members of God's Churches, let's work together to keep the 'spirit of the culture out' and do what God called us to do: change the world from the inside out.



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