

1 Corinthians: 'Being Church' (May-August 2022)

What does it mean 'to be Church' in a fast-moving, prosperous, self-oriented and multi-cultural society? Does it mean stepping back and hiding away in a hovel, or does it mean embracing the culture and joining in with anything and everything? Or is it rather more nuanced than that – with a very careful balance needed as we seek out what Jesus means by saying that his disciples are 'in the world' but not 'of the world' (John 17:16-18)?

This was an important question for the church in 1st-century Corinth; it's an important question for the church in Britain today; and it will have been an important question for plenty of churches across the world throughout the two millennia between.

Over these next four months at St Paul's, we'll be working our way through what our Bible calls '1 Corinthians'. Even if it won't always be easy to see precisely how what the apostle Paul wrote to them in their day and age should best be applied to us today, we should still be able to recognise some of the similarities between 'their' situation and 'ours'. For example, if we can readily imagine that the Corinthians (just like us) wanted to be seen as outward-looking and a 'church without walls', are there also things we can fruitfully take note of from what Paul teaches them about still remaining 'distinctive' and *not* thinking 'without walls' means 'anything goes'?

Corinth and its church

Corinth was an important city in Greece, situated at a natural crossroads for trade and consequently a major centre of commerce, where the people placed a high premium on wisdom. There were at least 12 temples, with the most infamous being dedicated to Aphrodite (the goddess of love), whose worship led to prostitution in the name of religion and a level of sexual immorality which resulted in the city becoming eponymous with promiscuity and debauchery (thus giving rise to the verb 'to corinthianise').

Paul first established a church in Corinth in AD 50/51 (on his 'second missionary journey') – working with a couple called Priscilla and Aquila, and remaining there "for some time" (Acts 18:18), possibly about 18 months. At some point after that, the church seems to have been led by a man named Apollos who had been disciplined by Priscilla and Aquila.

In c.AD 54, while on an extended visit to Ephesus, Paul appears to have become aware of problems emerging in the church at Corinth, prompting his sequence of letters to them.

Paul's letters to the Corinthians

Although we only have two letters to the Corinthians in our Bible, we can work out that in fact he wrote at least four, with the story going something like this:

- A letter from Paul earlier than our '1 Corinthians', addressing issues of immorality but now lost (this is referred to in 1 Cor 5:9);
- Some correspondence back from the Corinthians (see 1 Cor 7:1), along with further reports to Paul of problems needing resolving (1 Cor 1:11 & 16:17);
- Paul's letter known as '1 Corinthians', probably delivered there by Timothy (1 Cor 4:17)
- An apparent worsening of the situation, leading Paul to make a personal visit which went down very badly at the time (this is not mentioned in Acts but is referred to in a rather oblique way in 2 Cor 2:1 & 13:1);
- A so-called 'severe' letter from Paul (referred to in 2 Cor 2:3-4) – this is now assumed to be lost, although some commentators think it might have found its way, out of sequence, into the final part of 2 Corinthians (chapters 10-13);
- The writing by Paul of '2 Corinthians', out of relief and joy when he heard that things had now turned around (see 2 Cor 7:6-9).

The message of 1 Corinthians

The majority of the letter can come across as very critical, as Paul challenge the Corinthian church on a wide range of issues, rarely mincing his words. Even the wonderful chapter (13) on 'love' is actually in the context of putting the Corinthians straight on their misuse of spiritual gifts!

So, it is perhaps not surprising that large chunks of it tend not to appear very frequently (if at all) in churches' preaching programmes – which is a shame, because the letter does have plenty to teach us about what 'being church' means. Some of the issues that it covers relate to areas of potential congregational conflict, such as types of leadership, forms of worship and differing factions. Other issues relate to the church's relationship with the world and to 'cultural compromise' – sexual morality, 'pick and mix' worship and the juxtaposition of 'faith' with 'knowledge'.

But Paul doesn't write about all these things because he likes having a moan. His motive is *love* – love for the church that he himself started and which he has anguished over ever since, and above all love for the church that *Jesus Christ* loves and died for. 1 Corinthians might not strike us as an obviously theological tome like (say) Romans, but do look out for how often when tackling these practical issues Paul comes back to *Jesus* – and, in particular, to his death and resurrection.

Graham Everness
April 2022

Sunday-by-Sunday plan

Sunday	Passage	
8th May	1 Corinthians 1:1-17	Christ's church
15th May	1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5	Counter-cultural church
22nd May	1 Corinthians 5	Corporate Christian distinctiveness
29th May	1 Corinthians 7:17-23	Personal Christian distinctiveness
5th June	<i>Sovereignty of God series / Pentecost / Platinum Jubilee</i>	
12th June	<i>Focus on Stewardship</i>	
19th June	<i>'Being church' from a personal perspective</i>	
26th June	1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1	Freedom with responsibility
3rd July	<i>Sovereignty of God series</i>	
10th July	1 Corinthians 11:17-33	The Lord's Supper
17th July	1 Corinthians 12:12-26	One body, but many parts
24th July	1 Corinthians 13	Love
31st July	1 Corinthians 14	Gifts of the Spirit
7th August	1 Corinthians 15	A church of Resurrection Hope
14th August	1 Corinthians 16	Global community

[NB: Some adjustments to the above plan may occur, as we...]