

Note

1 Corinthians – Part 1 of 1

Summary

1 Corinthians - Part 1 of 12

One of the worst churches described in the NT. The church was founded by Paul. Corinth was very much like Singapore, a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural city of trade and business. The letter was written as a response to Chloe's report and the letter she brought containing doctrinal questions. The theme is seeing life in its entirety through the lenses of the gospel, beginning with the crucifixion and ending with the resurrection. Justification is a one-off immediate exchange transaction. Sanctification is an on-going moment-by-moment journey to be more like Christ. 1st Corinthians is all about Agape love, living for Christ through serving others.

Transcript

1 Corinthians – Part 1 of 1

Today we come to the book of 1 Corinthians as we have just finished the book of Romans.

In Romans, we see the foundation being laid for the gospel. We learn how God reveals His righteousness through the gospel. God creates a new race through Jesus Christ, a totally different human race as opposed to the sinful, corrupt, selfish race of Adam. Moreover, we learned how the church was unified as the Greeks, Gentiles and Jews lived together. Hence in this book, we see a solid foundation and model church and think that all churches in the New Testament are so wonderful.

However, when we come to the book of Corinthians, we find the worst church in the entire New Testament. We find a church with divisions, immorality, and legal suits against one another and disagreements over trivial issues. They had a vague or no idea at all about the resurrection. Hence, our idea of the model church is totally shattered in this book. A number of Christians believe that their churches are messed up and wish they could revert to the days of John Wesley, the Puritans or even the “New Testament” type of churches. They wish they were at the time of Jesus where they could walk around with him.

However, I personally don't think we would want to walk around with Jesus given the majority of us would probably not be able to handle it. There would be huge crowds around Jesus squinting just to have a glimpse of Him. The thought of “I wish I was at the time of Jesus” is almost an immature thinking, as today we have the Holy Spirit with us. We have a personal 24/7 partner as Jesus Christ lives in us. Looking back, we have the wrong idea, and are not thankful for what we have today, or hopeful for the near future. This is the problem with the sinful nature of men, always thinking of the good old days and never thankful for the present days.

When we put our trust in Jesus as our Savior we are justified. At that moment our sins are taken by him. Hence, in that one transaction, we are now just or justified in the eyes of our Almighty God. But the process of sanctification is a long and difficult journey as we put our trust in the Lord

to help us take one step at a time to overcome the old sinful nature that is still in us. In our mind, we want to be like Christ, but our flesh with all our old habits, gossips, laziness and sinful nature remain in us. Thus the saying: “The good that I would, I do not; but the evil that I would not, that I do”. That is the struggle of even Apostle Paul in the Book of Romans.

The journey of sanctification is a long journey. However, the main issue is not how fast we would go, rather going the right direction on the right track to become more Christ-like each day, leaving our sinful nature. The potential to be more and more Christ-like is up to us to grab by faith. Every time when we want to do something sinful, we remind ourselves that Christ through His Holy Spirit lives in us. We seek the Lord to help us by asking for His strength, love, kindness, patience and by faith, it will be given to us moment by moment. We are saved as we receive Christ once as our Savior and the judge justifies us once, but the journey of sanctification is a moment by moment journey.

Let us now look at the city of Corinth. What kind of city was it?

1. Corinth was very much like Singapore. It was at a strategic location on the Greek Peninsula and was like the perfect port at that place. It was geographically an international place, a bustling and great business place. People in Corinth were very prosperous because of its location and many newly rich people made their monies there.

2. It was also a religious place where there was a huge temple to the goddess of love, Aphrodite. This was a horrible temple because this was a “love god”. They worshipped god by having sex in the temple and reputedly there were 2000 temple prostitutes when Paul was there. While we thought the Canaanite religion of sex had died, it did not and continued with Baal outside of the Promised Land. In fact, as seen, it continued in the Greek religion in the temple of Aphrodite. Though they were rich, the people in Corinth were very immoral as it was normal to have sex even in religion. Today, sex was very much part of our lives. We cannot sell a “good” book, watch a “good” movie or crack a “good” joke unless there is sexual connotation in it. That is the culture we live in and it has become so pervasive until we forget.

3. It was a great business, immoral, wealthy place and a city under the Roman law. The people were accustomed to Roman law and used them frivolously to sue one another even within the churches.

4. It was a place very Greek in its philosophy. We wonder what have being Greek in philosophy got to do with us? The reason is that we are in fact very Greek in our philosophy: our educational system, medical system and everything all came down to the western civilization. Regardless, the Greeks have strong influences on western civilization. We Asians who have been educated in the western way would invariably have the Greek mindset. As mentioned earlier, in medical study, we separate the body from the mind, which is not a holistic approach as opposed to Asian medical study where we consider the person in totality. In western medicine, the cells have nothing to do with emotions. As a practicing doctor for many years, I can tell that the body and mind or emotions are very intertwined. Being mentally or spiritually sick could lead us to be physically sick too.

Similarly, we could go to church, attend bible study, and be well respected Christians and yet our lives have never shown a single day of mercy, nor ever evangelize in our lives. Yet, we could still become professors of theology because of our competent minds. In today's Christianity, a good Christian is defined as one who knows more bible verses than others. Others who do not know a single bible verse but praying for needy people, living simply so that they could give to the poor and needy are probably forgotten in church. The Bible mentioned: "The last shall be first one day when we get to heaven".

5. We read the history of the Corinth church in Acts Chapter 18 where we see Paul went out to the city of Corinth, a very strategic move because it was big city. Paul would aim for the city and go to the synagogues to preach. After preaching there for a while, he was expelled and would go to another nearby place. In the other place, the ruler of the synagogue called Crispus and his family were saved. Subsequently, many people were also saved. God told Paul in a vision to stay in the city because there were many people to reach out to. And he stayed for about 18 months and built a good church and then decided to move on to another city. While he was there, a lady called Chloe reported terrible things that happened in Corinth i.e. immorality, divisions and other questions such as "Is it good to get married", "What kind of food can we eat?" Hence, Paul wrote this letter to address Chloe's questions which were very practical problems of any churches today.

The theme of 1 Corinthians is seeing every aspect of our lives through the crucifixion in the beginning, and through the resurrection towards the end

of the book. These are the 2 bookmarks in this book. Every event that happened between the 2 periods has to be viewed through the lens of crucifixion and resurrection. When we see life through the crucifixion or the resurrection of Christ, then we see life in the right perspective. That is the gospel lens about Christ who died and about Christ who rose. All aspects of our lives must be judged and viewed through the gospel lens.

Chapter 1 to 4 deal with divisions.

1:13 ESV

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

Paul received a report that the Corinth church was divided into cliques. After Paul left the place, Apollos took over together with Cephas who came in to help the church. Church members then began to make comparisons, such as type of policies, intellect of preacher, and whether he came from Alexandria, the then Harvard University of the ancient world. In a typical church in Corinth or Singapore, people like or dislike certain preachers. This causes divisions within the church. Paul stepped in to stop them and asked them to see everything through the gospel. As long as a man preaches the gospel faithfully, it does not matter his accent, style, dress-sense.

2:1-2

And I, when I came to you brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.

When we go to a church, we don't look out for the preacher's style of preaching whether he is polished and delivers a brilliant sermon. The issue is whether he preaches Christ and Him crucified, or is he preaching Christ and Him being Santa Claus. This is foundational. Newly rich people like to focus on all the fancy frills of life and get distracted by them such as the preacher's speech and style regardless of substance.

4.7

For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

Cliques formed because we feel we are better than others rather than being a family of Christ. We tend to think we are smarter, richer and more hardworking compared to others who may be shallow and lacking in bible knowledge. Paul chastised the people, and challenged them to acknowledge that all blessings come from Christ.

Chapter 5 - Immorality defiles the Church.

5:1

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.

Thus this man was having sexual immorality with his stepmother. Even in pagan culture, it was unacceptable and degrading to his father. However, it was normal as they can have sex in the temple or with anyone. We are reminded the Corinthian with its Greek philosophy divides the spiritual from the physical bodies. As long as they worshipped in church, knew the doctrines, what they did with their bodies was a separate issue.

3:16 and (6:19)

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

Our body is sacred. Even today after attending church, taking notes, memorize bible verses, argue and debate over certain verses, we indulge our bodies. We rationalise that indulging our bodies in food, dressing, pampering ourselves with cosmetics etc are acceptable. However, we should offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God as our bodies are temples of God and we have to be careful in handling it. For the Corinthians the body is separate and they can indulge it.

Chapter 6 – Lawsuits against believers.

Not only in the Roman days, even in today's church, there are many laws in the church on church constitutions. At our elders meetings, we wonder whether we are lawyers or guardians of the spiritual state of the church. At those meetings, the focus is no longer about its spiritual state but on minor points of the law. We are like the Romans dealing with all kinds of law and in many churches; the business meetings are like a court of law.

Chapter 7 – Status.

People should go to church in their Sunday best to be respectful. However, there are some people who would go to show-off.

7:21 Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity).

Paul is saying our social status in this world is no big deal because there will be a resurrection one day and there will be no social status in heaven.

7:29-31

This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they have no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they have no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

Paul means that we who are born again should not be overly concerned about life in this world. We do not need to fill our 'bucket list' before we leave this world. At the end of 1 Corinthians 15, Paul emphasizes the bodily resurrection. Some think that one day we will leave our bodies on earth and our souls will go up to heaven and so had no enjoy food and many other things. Therefore, there is an urgency among Christians to enjoy all those things now. But Paul said there will be a bodily resurrection and what we will enjoy in heaven will far surpass anything on earth, and what we will regret will be the opportunities to evangelize and to help those in need.

Chapter 8 – Food offered to idols.

The people had arguments over food offered to idols. Paul's principle is very simple. If we eat the meat that was offered to idols and it will affect someone very weak in faith, then we should not take it. It would cause someone's faith to be stumbled and the person would think that we, Christians, also worship idols and have many gods. However, if there is no one around us and we know that these idols are nothing compared to our God, then we can eat food offered to idols. Main lesson - don't stumble anyone.

8:13

Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Chapter 9 - Paul's apostleship is questioned.

9:1 Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?

People are questioning Paul's apostleship. We would wonder the reason behind this questioning. The answer is very simple and is found at chapter 9:19

9:19 For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.

9:20 To the Jews I became as a Jew in order to win the Jews. To those under the law and became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.

9:21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.

9:22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.

Why did they question Paul's apostleship? He didn't look like an apostle to their newly rich mind since he was serving people like a servant. If Paul was with the poorest, he served the poorest, looking like the poorest and became all things to all men. He did not fit the people's mind of a church leader who has an impressive look. Very few would feel proud if their pastors look like a gardener or servant. On the other hand, they feel proud if their pastors have an impressive look. The people began to doubt Paul who looked so ordinary. Even now, 2000 years later, church members still the same "Corinthian mindset".

Chapter 10

During those times, the Jews had 613 laws in the Torah and additional tens of thousands of laws added by their religious leaders. What about us? Are we still under the Torah laws. What is lawful for us?

10:23-24

"All things are lawful", but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful", but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.

Ask yourself - does it build up? Does it help their faith, life? How to serve others.

10:31

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

We should therefore do everything we can to help others to glorify God.

Chapter 11 – Head coverings

In this chapter, there are all kinds of bizarre interpretations such as should women wear veils, scarfs, hats, coverings etc. The principle in this chapter is very simple.

11:3

But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.

The first half of chapter 11 is about headship. Men as the head of the family should not have long hair or wear hats or coverings so that their heads can be seen. It is a reminder from God that the man is the head. Newly rich women wanted to be the head of the house but the head of a wife is her husband. Therefore, the husband should show his head, while the woman covers her head.

The second part of Chapter 11 is about the Lord's Supper. In those days, the Lord's Supper was a whole meal and part of the meal was breaking bread and taking wine. There were people all getting drunk, over eating at the Lord's Supper and hence it lost its purpose. Nowadays, we do not take a full meal on Lord's Supper but just a tiny piece of bread and small cup of wine/juice to signify it. For most church believers, it is just a ritual and has lost its purpose. Therefore, Paul emphasizes the goal in 1Corinthians 11.

Chapter 12 - Spiritual gifts

The members in the church of Corinth had lots of spiritual gifts. They had gifts of wisdom, knowledge, healing, tongues and all kinds of gifts. However, they did not have Christ in them and they started to show off their gifts. All gifted people have a struggle within not to be proud people, unless they have the understanding that these gifts from God are for serving others and not to show off.

12:22-26

On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

Therefore gifts are to help the weaker parts of the body, whether it is the gift of teaching, understanding healing; the idea of spiritual gifts is to serve the body. In Chapter 12, it describes the church as a body. The vulnerable parts of the body like eyes, ribs, hearts, livers and all internal body parts are protected by the stronger parts of the body such as the strong arms, chest, stomach walls etc. Similarly, when we are given strength in something, it is to protect the weaker members of the church and not to show off our strengths.

The ending is very interesting,

12:30-31

Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?
31 But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Before he speaks on tongues, he speaks on love. Chapter 13 – The way of Love

Chapter 13 is a great chapter describing agape love.

13:1-2

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

It emphasizes that if you have all the gifts but not love, you are nothing. The English word of love does not cover the meaning of love as described in Chapter 13. The Greeks had several words for love but three common types are Eros - the sexual love; Philadelphia (not the name of a city) as Phila is from the word Philia meaning love - brotherly love. And the third type of love is Agape love – the love of giving when there is a need.

Sometimes the word “emo” is used to describe love e.g. “God feels “emo” about us. How can God feel “emo” about Israel? Israel was so stubborn, so rebellious; how can God feel “emo” about Corinth? Do you know why God loves Israel? Because they needed His love; and He loves Corinth because they needed His Love. Agape love is a sacrificial, giving love. In fact most people have no idea of the meaning of “God is love”. The love described here is a love that can only come from the Cross. When we have tasted the love of Christ for sinners like us, then we can give this love.

Chapter 14 is all about tongues.

People questioned whether there is such a thing as speaking in tongues. The definition of tongues in the Bible is given in Acts Chapter 2. It is a real language that you have not learnt before. Chapter 14 describes the purpose. If you have the gift of tongues, be sure you use it for the right reason.

14:5. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

Let's focus on the word “built up”. In King James Bible version, it is called “edify”.

14:12 So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

Therefore, every time when we exercise our gifts of tongues, healing or whatever, we have to ask ourselves whether we are helping or building up someone (edifying).

14:26 What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.

In the whole chapter on gifts and particularly gift of tongues it was mentioned three times - Whatever we do with our gifts, is it for building up somebody, not for showing off. The gift of tongues is mentioned in the Bible and I believe it is a language to encourage and build up someone and not to show off.

Chapter 15 – The Resurrection of Christ

Though the church of Corinth heard the gospel about Christ, and Him crucified and Him risen, they did not quite get the part on the resurrection.

15:1-4

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you - unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,

The Corinthian Christians did not understand “bodily resurrection” as they believed the physical body would be left behind when their spiritual bodies go to heaven. The majority of Christians also think alike. This is not true as there will be “bodily resurrection” when we get to heaven.

15:19

If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are all people most to be pitied.

This emphasises that we do not focus on our good life only on this earth as we would have a bodily resurrection when we get to heaven and shall meet those people whom we have wronged on earth or did not help them when they were in need. We would have to face them for eternity. In the New Heaven and New Earth, all believers would meet again regardless of your

previous status on earth. Paul began with the crucifixion and ends with the resurrection.

What is the purpose of the book of 1 Corinthians? It is about agape love and the God who serve us. Do everything for others. God did everything for us and yet we did not recognize Him. When we said God is love, we mean God chose to love us, Christ chose to live a sinless life, and serve us on the cross, The Holy Spirit lives in us and serve us as our partner.

What is our idea of love? Serving, or do we go to church looking for pastors, music, ambience to fit us?

I hope we will see the God who loves even the horrible nation of Israel, love us because we need His love. Today, there are many people whom we can show God's love in our church, reaching out to them with our gifts and resources that God has blessed us with - because God is love.

May God make us an outflow of God's agape love to others.

God bless.