

DO EVERYTHING IN LOVE

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians contains our earliest words about communion (chapter 11), a beautiful description of love (chapter 13) and a lengthy section on the resurrection of the body (chapter 15). In short, the New Testament would be poorer without this letter to a church in crisis. The contents of the letter make more sense if you understand the setting.

ANCIENT CORINTH

Corinth had been a major city of antiquity, probably founded by Dorian Greeks in the tenth century B.C. For over 850 years it was a major hub of trade. It was quite worldly and very cosmopolitan. But in 146 B.C., Corinth was demolished by the Roman legions. They killed all the Corinthian men and sold all the women and children into slavery, destroying all the buildings and leaving the city in ruins for 100 years. But the location was so strategic that Julius Caesar established a colony there in 44 B.C. and slowly the city came back to life.

The people who reinhabited Corinth were primarily veterans of the Roman legions and many former slaves. In this new city, they discovered opportunities for economic and social advancement that would not have been available to them elsewhere. The military veterans were steeped in the chains of command. Former slaves were well aware of levels of authority and pecking orders and sought to claim new identities through upward mobility.

Another feature of the Corinthian church was that the majority of the new Christians were gentiles. There seems to have been only a small Jewish community in Corinth and so only a small number of converts from the synagogue were members of the Christian community. Thus only a small number of members of the church were familiar with the commandments, promises, and expectations of the Old Testament.

Paul spent about 18 months in Corinth preaching and planting seeds for Christian community. Within three or four years, some problems and serious misunderstandings arose in the Corinthian Christian community. They arose largely out of the tendency of some to arrange relationships in classes of order and importance in which pride and rivalry were seen as normal.

THE LETTER

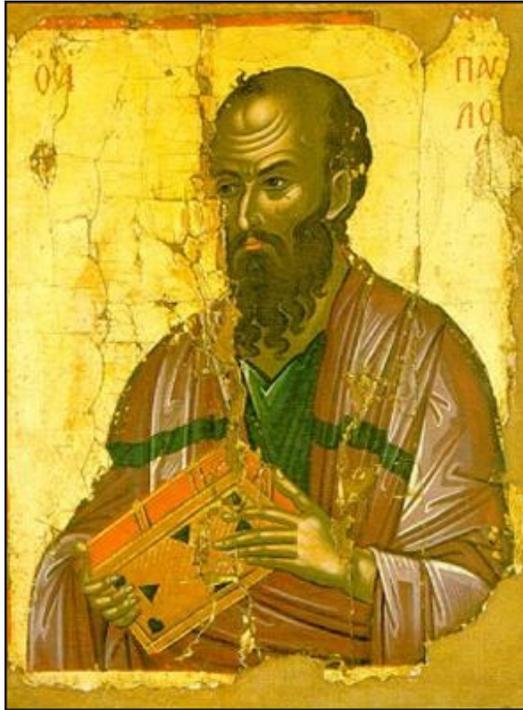
First Corinthians is first and foremost a letter and so we are reading over the shoulder of the Corinthian Christians and considering what we read, they would likely prefer that the letter had not been preserved.

Two things prompted Paul to write to this group. First, he had received a report from "Chloe's people" that there was serious dissension within the community (1:11). The second issue came when the Corinthians wrote to Paul to ask his advice on several things upon which there was disagreement among them.

Paul wrote a pastoral letter addressing controversies about the resurrection, abuses of the Lord's Supper, sexual immorality, legal disputes—Christians who were suing one another—the consumption of meat offered to idols, and the question of who had the best gifts to offer to the church. The whole book of First Corinthians is an extended appeal for unity.

Some of these Corinthian Christians are not just upwardly mobile economically and culturally, they are also upwardly mobile spiritually. They want to have—and claim to have—the best spiritual experience. Some have been given gifts of the Spirit that they feel are spiritually superior. This is costing the community dearly, not just because of hurt feelings and disagreements but because this attitude flies in the face of the Gospel. Earlier in First Corinthians, Paul wrote: "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1:27). But "the strong" haven't been paying attention. They have been caught up in exercising showy displays of spirituality.

Some of them are disrupting or dominating the church's meetings by disorderly utterances that are unintelligible to other members of the community, Spirit-inspired or not. Those who are speaking in these unintelligible tongues seem to be proud and joyful about their ability to enter the heavenly sphere and speak with "tongues of angels." Others, who are within earshot during worship, find both the utterance and the pride disruptive. Paul never disputes the authenticity of these people's experiences or the gifts they have received. But he is cautionary and corrective as he writes about the practices in dispute.



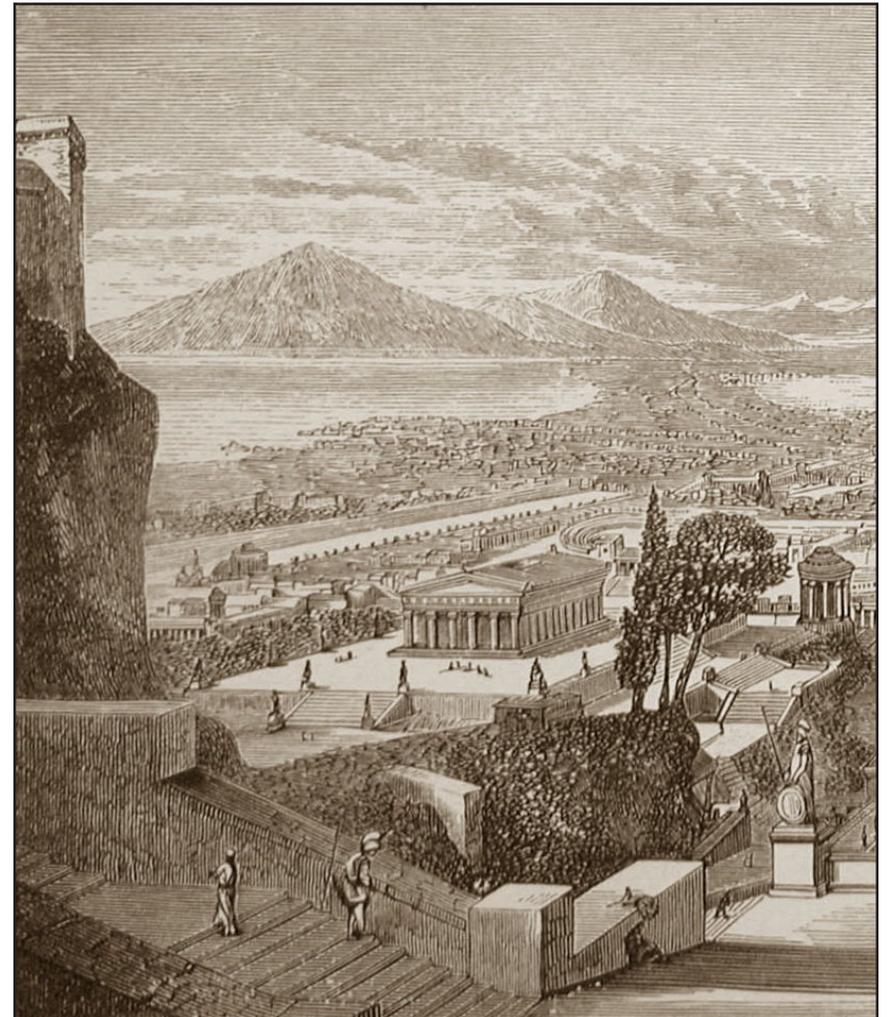
OVERVIEW OF STUDY

Reading the text ahead of the class will be helpful. Here is what the course will cover:

Week	Passage
1	1 Corinthians 1
2	1 Corinthians 2-3
3	1 Corinthians 4-5
4	1 Corinthians 6-7
5	1 Corinthians 8-10
6	1 Corinthians 11-12
7	1 Corinthians 13-14
8	1 Corinthians 15-16

King of Peace Episcopal Church
6230 Laurel Island Parkway ≈ Kingsland, Georgia 31548
(912) 510-8958 ≈ www.kingofpeace.org

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AN 8 WEEK STUDY OF FIRST CORINTHIANS