

1 Corinthians 1:1

I have a soft spot in my heart for 1 Corinthians – it's one of those Bible books that I can't keep away from; mind you, it can be tough going in parts but that doesn't put me off, that doesn't dampen my enthusiasm one little bit. It's a great book! And it's written by the maestro himself, the apostle Paul.

Sixteen chapters in all, you could read it in half an hour or so; I recommend you rise to the challenge and read it in a couple of different versions. When you do I think you'll discover there's so much in it for the seasoned believer, so much you can sink your teeth into; at the same time, there's a lot in there for the brand new convert to get them grounded in the great truths of the Christian faith.

You see, folks, I reckon if we have a good working knowledge of this book we're well on our way to knowing what God wants his church to be like. Paul deals with many 'live' issues – he is writing here to real people in a real church, people who are up to their necks with all kinds of mega problems, people who are struggling to get their act together, people who find themselves in a pagan hostile world and who are in serious danger of losing the plot.

Sounds familiar. Maybe it does. Well, folks, that's what living for God in the twenty-first century is all about: it's a tough and torrid assignment and it doesn't get any easier – but God is just the same today as he was in the early days of the church. And the timeless principles outlined by Paul are just as relevant now as they were away back then! Here's a letter then that is full of practical solutions to problems in the pews.

Let me give you some idea as to the kind of place Corinth was in the first century! Chuck Swindoll tells us, 'it was fast and gaudy, it was shallow and brassy, it was slick and sassy, it was sensual and busy' – such was Corinth. It has been labelled the 'Vanity Fair of ancient Greece'.

Corinth was a sailor's favourite port, for fairly obvious reasons. It was also a prodigal's paradise, and a policeman's nightmare. If church history is anything to go by, Corinth was renowned as a preacher's graveyard. Reading between the lines, you'll see that Corinth was one of the vice capitals of the world of its day, a city drunk on wealth and immorality.

A few years back I was able to visit the ancient ruins of the city of Corinth – I've done the touristy thing and walked where Paul walked; if you're in the region, it's well worth a visit. There's so much to see and do. Your Bible will never be quite the same again. It seems to me that Corinth's location was the master key to its opulence. In his day, the city controlled access to two seas: the Aegean in the west and the Ionian in the east. Then there was the main trade route from north to south running through the centre of Corinth. In that sense, the city had so much going for it, it was a Mecca for travellers and traders; all of this combined to make Corinth an incredibly wealthy city indeed.

It had a growing economy that was only matched by its rising population—it was on the up, as we sometimes say. In terms of religion it was a pluralistic society. You name it, they had it—a god for this, a goddess for that—they had them all!

The most famous icon was probably Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Historians tell us that a thousand prostitutes served in her temple by day—and when their 9-5 job was over, they carried on their lucrative trade into the streets at night.

Actually, Corinth's notorious reputation for sexual promiscuity was so widespread that a term was coined to describe it, it was the phrase: 'to Corinthianise', that's what people did when they engaged in various acts of sexual immorality. Says something, doesn't it!

Corinth was also world famous for its commitment to sports – it was the site of the highly competitive Isthmian Games, which were rated second in importance to the Olympics. They were held every two years while the Olympics as you know are held on a four year cycle.

The city was geared for such events and it wasn't a problem for them to accommodate all those participating – they had a huge purpose built stadium as well as two superb theatres, the outdoor arena seated up to 18,000 people and the indoor venue catered for another 3,000.

Like so much that happened in Corinth, these games were not only unbelievably popular for their sporting prowess, they were also an ideal environment for the men to freely indulge in the seedier side of life. In that sense, Corinth lived up to its rather dubious but very accurate name.

I think we'll pause for a short music break and when we come back we'll take a look at what happened when Paul paid a visit to sin city.

MUSIC BREAK

Corinth was a hell-hole! And that's being polite! Because of its reputation near and far, it was a magnet for all kinds of folk, it attracted a potpourri of people—from super fit athletes and business executives to gangsters and prostitutes. It was one of those 24/7 cities where everyone found their niche. For better or worse, usually for worse, it has to be said!

Paul had a fair idea what the place was like – mention Corinth and the first thing that came to mind was its decadence. He had no delusions as to its rank sinfulness, he knew what he was in for when he got there! But Paul being Paul, he knew full well that people in that situation need the Lord – and he was keen to share the story of Jesus with them.

After all, if he didn't lead from the front, no one else was going to venture into Satan's territory. A quick look at Acts 18 gives us some idea of the apprehension of Paul – he knew it was a huge task but he also believed that God had a special work for him to do in that area. The light could penetrate the darkness and a church could be born. He knew it and he had no doubts as to the ability of God to turn a situation round. That's what God specialises in doing anyway.

It's great to see how God meets us at the point of our need, if you read Acts 18, verses 9 and 10, you'll get a fair idea as to how Paul

was feeling – he had the jitters as we sometimes say. But God rallied his spirits with a wonderful promise – his visit was guaranteed success right from the very start. The Lord told him: ‘Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.’

Hey, isn’t that tremendous! God was more or less saying, Paul, you’re on to a winner! Blessing was assured. There would be fruit. His preaching was going to see results! That’s what Paul needed to know and hear – as a consequence, the preacher man stayed in the city for the best part of eighteen months. It was a wonderful period of phenomenal blessing – that’s what happens when man does his part, the good news is God always keeps his part of the deal.

Yes, in the providence and goodness of God, a church was born right in the heart of the devil’s stronghold. That’s ample proof that the grace of God is boundless – it doesn’t matter how dark the night, the light shines through; it doesn’t matter how far a man has sunk in the mud and mire, the gospel of Christ can pull him out! Jesus changes people!

It’s always encouraging to see how God uses ordinary people in his global work. There was Paul, but he wasn’t on his own in the city, he was accompanied by Aquila and Priscilla. Quite a team, it has to be said. A formidable trio! When Paul sensed his time was up in Corinth, he set sail for Ephesus, that was in the autumn of AD 52. He left his friends there and he moved on to Caesarea and Antioch before beginning another one of his famed missionary journey’s; you can read all about that in Acts 18:19-22.

God is always a step ahead of us, he’s already planning for the day after when we’re still thinking about today. You see, one thing leads to another in Ephesus; that’s when the husband and wife duo of Aquila and Priscilla came across a polished Jewish guy by the name of Apollos.

He was preaching his socks off about Jesus – that’s great! The downside is, he had a few gaping holes in his knowledge of the Lord

– that’s where the Lord used Aquila and Priscilla to plug the holes in his theology. After that was done, they sent him up the road to Corinth. When Apollos got there, in no time at all, he started building on the solid foundation Paul had left. In the plan of God, he would take the believers on to the next level in their relationship with Jesus Christ. You see, in the big picture, God uses all kinds of people.

We’ll take a break and when we come back I want us to see the role that Paul played in communicating with the church in the city of Corinth. In the Bible, we have two inspired letters – the fact is, Paul actually wrote three! My question is – where’s the missing letter?

MUSIC BREAK

Just before the break, I threw the spanner in the works when I said that Paul had written more than two letters to the church in Corinth. In fact, we know he wrote at least three – the question is, where’s the missing one? Believe it or not, it’s lost!

That much we know from 1 Corinthians 5:9 where Paul refers to it. According to Paul, the believers misunderstood this letter, that’s why Paul wrote them another letter and that’s the one we refer to as 1 Corinthians. In actual fact, it was his second letter; Paul put pen to paper around AD 57. Therefore, when we read the letter the Bible calls 2 Corinthians, that is Paul’s third item of correspondence with them.

Another reason why Paul wrote is given in 1:11 and 16:17 – it appears that the church was experiencing a number of serious problems – the people were polarising, they were having a go at one another, they were dividing up into various factions; a split was on the cards, it really was as bad as that, unless someone of Paul’s stature intervened fast.

Paul pulled no punches when he revealed the source of his information – he told them: ‘I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from

Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.'

It must have broken Paul's heart, but such is life in evangelical churches. We have to get on with it and, from time to time, we are left to pick up the pieces. As they say, the devil makes hay while the sun is shining! Give the enemy an inch and he'll take more than a mile. You see, these folks wanted the best of both worlds – they wanted to have the immense spiritual blessings of the new life but hang on to the pleasures of the old. The fact is, you can't run with the foxes and hunt with the hounds! The sad story of this church illustrates that point – it's a powerful visual aid of a church in decline, it spiralled from riches to rags! For them, it was downhill all the way!

Yes, the church in Corinth had more than its share of problems, but God's wisdom had the answer. In that sense, the message of the epistle is sharp and concise. In a few words, Paul tells them: 'hey folks, don't just get smart, be wise!' It's not about knowing, it's all about being and doing! It's being the kind of people God wants us to be and it's doing the kind of things God wants us to do! And being that and doing that in a world that's full of muddled thinking and messy living.

We'll pause there for a short music break and when we come back I want us to begin to unpack some of Paul's teaching in chapter one.

MUSIC BREAK

Paul kick-starts the book with a reminder to the church of his role in the body of Christ. He is an apostle! They knew that anyway but they needed to be reminded of it – you see, it was only an apostle who could tell them a few home truths like he was about to do. He had the authority to do it for God's power was vested in him. Under God, he could crack the whip as and when it was needed – by the same token, he could minister into a situation that required tenderness and compassion. That's one thing I admire in Paul, the guy is versatile in terms of Christian ministry, he's as flexible as a plastic card!

He's quick to also remind them that he is what he is 'by the will of God'. In other words, he didn't appoint himself to this role – he's right in the centre of God's will for his life and, because of that, he's a round peg in a round hole.

When it comes to serving Jesus, that's the way it ought to be, it's the way it should be. In churches around the country and in mission fields around the world, I've come across far too many folks who have been spiritual misfits. People who do their best, sure they do, but it's fairly obvious they're playing out of position. When that happens, there's a feeling of frustration in the air and that isn't good in the long term, never mind the short term!

Paul also mentions another person in verse 1 – he calls him 'our brother Sosthenes'. I get the feeling from the way Paul speaks of him that the believers in Corinth would know exactly who Paul was talking about. He refers to him as 'our brother' – that implies they know him. He's obviously a saved man – he has a personal relationship with God, he's a brother in the Lord; and he's happy to play second fiddle to Paul.

The chances are that Sosthenes was the amanuensis, that is, he was the guy who did the donkey work when it came to penning this unusually long letter: Paul dictated the text and he wrote it down verbatim. An onerous task, sure, but when you're doing what God wants you to do, you can do it with a big smile on your face. As I said a minute ago, God has something special for every one of us to do! It may be upfront, it may be behind the scenes, all that matters for you and me is that we are in the orbit of God's will for our lives. In tomorrow's program, we'll take a look at what Paul says about the church in verse 2, and how he describes it. To me, it reinforces the truth that God's people are supposed to be a holy people in a filthy dirty world. That was the problem of the folk in Corinth – they were contaminated and confused – they were living wrong and thinking wrong! The only way for them to get back on the right track was for them to get back to God, and back to the word of God.

Hence Paul's impassioned appeal for unity to a seriously divided church, hence Paul's stirring appeal for purity in a polluted world. Some letter, isn't it! We're going to work our way through it, and as we do, you'll discover Paul deals with issues which were hot potatoes in his day – such as the role of women in ministry, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the mindset that wanted to sue other believers, the big question of how do we 'do' church! All of these and more besides and, hey, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to work out that many of these issues are still around us in the third millennium. You see, when it comes to dealing with issues of faith and order in the local church, what I say is not that important, we want to hear and we need to hear what God has to say!