

1 Corinthians-by Rick Stark

Chapter 1

First things of 1st Corinthians... the purpose of a greeting and prologue. Don't miss them. One (vv.1-3), contrary to sloppy thinking, the church (locally and "in every place") belongs to God. It is not the social construct of man nor belongs to Corinth itself. Rather, it is what? Who? And you? Two (vv.4-6), we learn that we should "never miss the good for the perfect." The apostle gives thanks to God (rejoicing for the gifts others have received), even though he knows their immaturity will often skew grace and the graces given by God (speech, knowledge, spiritual gifts and earnestness). But now here's the problem in the church (vv.10-17... a recurrent theme thru ch.14): Continuing to breath the "competitive, consumeristic and cosmopolitan air" of Corinth has turned the church horizontal rather than vertical. Are personality cults, power plays pride and divisiveness compatible with the gospel? NOT! This is exactly why the gospel of the Cross is so scandalous. It's counter-intuitive to self-righteousness, self-promotion, and self-satisfaction. In God's wisdom at the Cross, He nullifies the world's pompous way of thinking and all the slick veneer that's out there, and He effectively brings about "the great reversal": life over death, triumph over tragedy, weakness over strength, humility over nobility, wisdom over cleverness, righteousness to the unrighteous, and redemption to the lost. "Don't try to figure it out," Paul says. "Just look around the church... maybe in the mirror, too!"

Chapter 2

The Simplicity of the Cross (vv.1-5). Remember how the gospel first came to you? But let's admit... we've all been impressed a time or two with slick communicators, audience-pleasers who spin a therapeutic message that "works." But where must the birth and basis of the Christian faith rest? On God's effective action: defined in terms of the Cross, mediated through the agency of the Holy Spirit. The test: Who is the hero of your own story – you or Christ? Now, are we to be "simpletons"? Not! *True Wisdom of the Cross*(vv.6-13), as contrasted with false wisdom (1:19-21) is the hidden wisdom of God (i.e. a crucified Christ) echoing from eternity past, is God-given, revealed and received through the work of the Spirit, and which leads the people of God toward "spiritual" maturity (i.e. not a bigger nor a better you, but a Bigger Jesus). The test: Are you more clever or more cross-centered and Christ-like? *The "Natural Person"* (vv. 14-16) cannot find access to it on their own terms, whether by superstitious, scientific or political means. Don't be surprised that the unbeliever or the world thinks or acts the way they do. The wisdom needed is too profound for human discovery or imagination, and must be imparted by the Holy Spirit who indwells the believer and opens our eyes to the truth of God's Word.

Chapter 3

Stunted Spirituality (vv.1-9) I want to be "spiritual" (as mature, relating to the things of the Spirit: the wisdom of the Cross, the promises of Scripture, as having the "mind of Christ") and I want the church this way. Maybe you do too. But why can't the apostle Paul address the Christians of Corinth as those who are "spiritual"? Might the problem be misplaced allegiances and misunderstanding how we are to grow spiritually... together? *Spiritual Growth (vv.10-17)*. The metaphor of a building gives us some helpful tracks to run on. First there is a foundation and then a progressive improvement upon that foundation: one which is laid (passive, gospel heard, Christ received by grace thru faith); and the other which is made (active, Christ appropriated in every area by grace thru faith). How might the Christian be involved in this process? Like a city-issued "certificate of occupancy," there's a test coming, an examination of each structure. The apostle supplies proper motivation: may our lives and our church truly be a "holy temple" erected and enduring for God's occupation and worship. *Spiritual Danger (vv.18-23)*. What is self-deception rooted in? It is to "wanna-be with the wanna-be's" (your favorite preacher, the

latest novelty) over against one's identity in Christ and all His benefits... which are? (go ahead, name them!). On the other hand, it is also *FOMO* (fear of missing out) over against our identity in Christ and... you guessed it... all His benefits. But godly wisdom leads one to humbly admit what you don't know that you might begin to learn... beginning with: yes, again... Christ and all His benefits.

Chapter 4

A Clear Conscience (vv. 1-7) FOMO is one thing; FONMU is another. There's a surprising confidence over against *FONMU* (fear of not measuring up) that Paul expresses and that we should reflect upon here. In what is this confidence is rooted in? The right metrics: "trustworthiness" (faithfulness even over fruitfulness). So how are you doing? "Puffed up or Filled up?" It's a fair question to ask... don't be self-deceived! But it's not introspection promoted here, rather honest (if not also fallible) awareness of oneself. Ultimately, over your own or anyone's else's evaluation, there's a freedom of conscience in leaving it all (guilt or acquittal) in the hands of the Lord... good and merciful hands at that. *An Ultimate Glory* (vv. 8-13). So now Paul expands upon his main argument (v. 7), connecting the two sections by continuing to weave his triple-themes: Is your glory (boasting, confidence) in men or in the Cross of Christ (justification by grace thru faith alone); wisdom versus foolishness; spiritual versus fleshly. So, what do you make of Paul's biting irony? Provocative no doubt: about where one finds glory, leveling any sense of self-congratulatory "we have arrived" attitude. "*God is not to be found except in sufferings and in the cross.*" (Martin Luther; *Phil. 3:10-11*) And by whom might you be willing to receive such provocation? For what reason? *A Father's Love* (vv. 14-21). Pastoral truth and love... a big stick and big empathy... not sameness but the scent of diversity... not compliance but catholicity in the Spirit. Sounds like the Lord to me. And you say?

Chapter 5

On Complacency (vv. 1-2). It's the proverbial "frog in the kettle" at Corinth, isn't it? Spiritual arrogance is about to boil the church in a kettle of indifference. Sound familiar? Paul is grieved; the Lord too. Maybe it's not this particular sin issue, but what might cause you to grieve over in the 21st century church? Some posit the problem is prosperity... the lack of suffering breeds complacency. "*God whispers to us in our pleasures but shouts in our pains.*" (C.S. Lewis) Others suppose it's the undue attention to the "seats & nickels... the wealthy & influential." Still others say the problem is the lack of transparency in local leadership & administration. How does the church avoid or navigate this? Over against our obsession with a sense of autonomy, Paul's solution is the same as Jesus' (Matt. 18) – *Church Discipline* (vv. 3-8), which is both positive and negative discipleship. Out of tough love (Heb. 12:7-11) comes a two-fold aim: to save the offender (even if thru suffering); to save the church (recover the identity of the church as God's new creation in Jesus Christ). *Peace & Purity of the Church* (vv. 9-13). This is not a withdrawal from the world to some inward Christian ghetto, but the church is to be a decisive model of redemption to a new status, identity and lifestyle as God's people and shining out into a broken world.

Chapter 6

Grasping Beyond Oneself. Three separate issues (lawsuits, immorality and Christian liberty) reflect one major underlying issue: leveraging and manipulation... the strong over the vulnerable... appetites over self-control... foolishness over wisdom... a grasping what is not one's own and beyond what God has promised. It's a betrayal of the body of Christ and a blurring of the gospel in the world. The Christian is to leave all such "*grasping*" behind as incompatible with being part of God's new creation (v. 3, 11, 20). What does that look like? Wisdom, deference of love in the church (the great reversal of the Cross, 1:18-28) rather than a manipulation of the more vulnerable (in this case, the unjust Roman civil court). The same goes

for the perversion of Christian liberty (vv.12ff), living by appetites (physical and sexual) as if our body is somehow distinct and disengaged rather than in union with and submission to the Lord and fidelity toward one another. When we interpret our lives as the dwelling place of the Spirit... why this changes everything! What might be areas in my own life where I am grasping for something for which only God can give? Indifference (ch.5) is one thing; but to willfully practice such "*grasping*" is not at all spiritual superiority as some suppose but rather spiritual betrayal of the great costliness of Christ's lifeblood given for you.

Chapter 7

On Marriage (vv. 1-16). Corinthian awareness that "*they don't know what they don't know*" is commendable (v.1... as opposed to the blindness and indifference, ch.1-6). Contrary to the perverted influences in Corinth, true spirituality is not experienced as some esoteric disembodied spirit (total sexual abstinence in marriage and reason not to marry). Rather, just the opposite: a robust theology of marriage, sexuality, and singleness is an ordained context for the Christian life and growth in holiness. How so? (the gifts of God, the mutuality and reciprocity experienced, the delight over duty, opportunity for service, etc...) There's no category for just "living together" (married or not) and divorce is not a preferred option. Why? Think gospel; think God's love and promises to upon families... never say never! *No Greener Grass (vv. 17-31)*. For spiritual contentment's sake, the grass is never greener on the other side of the fence, whether marriage, singleness, work, etc... God knows where you are, calls you where you are; quit looking somewhere else. Our lives are but a vapor... live out the freedom in Christ right where you are! *Live Free (32-40)*. Free from what? From practical anxieties and into a practiced peace. How? Specifics may vary for each, but what Paul is emphasizing is that there's a pattern, a rhythm, and order in the will and priorities of God that the Scriptures teach. Listen. Follow.

Chapter 8

Love In the Grey. To eat or not? Drink or not? Living in community with other believers brings up all kinds of questions. The apostle continues to guide the church in the wisdom and fullness of the new creation made possible by the Cross of Christ. In a beautifully diverse church, many whom were converted out of bondage to destructive excesses of materialism, alcoholism, gluttony, iconic superstition, how do we navigate the various concerns and scruples of conscience? What is the Christian's responsibility, not toward the "*legalist*" (another category altogether), but toward the "weak," Christians who feel it necessary because of their weaknesses to erect certain boundaries? It's distilled in principle: "*puffed up or build up*"? To flaunt indiscriminately one's knowledge of the liberties we have in Christ ("food once offered to idols"... in our day, maybe wine... both which are gifts from God in and of themselves) and thereby tear down a brother or sister in Christ... or to build them up by loving sacrificially, refusing to insist that others immediately embrace a more robust freedom or to entice them to violate their conscience? Christ alone is Lord of the conscience. All believers are at various points in this journey as Christ (Word & Spirit) shapes us into maturity. Let love win: love God, love neighbor... that's living well in the new community of Christ.

Chapter 9

Competence & Character. These two are non-negotiables in legitimate spiritual leadership (in Paul's case, apostleship). But we must remember the context so that we don't regard this as merely a defense of Paul's apostleship and miss his intended goal ("*Jesus must increase, but I must decrease*," Jn.3:30). In continuing to teach about "Christian liberty" (strong vs weak, ch.8), Paul uses himself as an example, establishing his legitimate rights only to willingly give up his rights. Principles abound here on the priority of purity and peace of the gospel (unity of the church). But take a moment to reflect upon the qualities of mature spiritual leadership

demonstrated by Paul. How about competence & character? Competence is judged by familiarity with its subject (v.1), an ability to clearly communicate it (vv.3-14... from common sense to theology), external fruitfulness (v.2), and of course, a sense of divine calling (vv.14-18). Character is the inseparable "*other side of the coin*": sacrifice (v.12b, 15... even our "liberties"), humility (v.16-18, note the words "*noboasting... entrusted... stewardship*"), deep gospel-motives (vv.19-23, the need, including his own need of the gospel); and of course, spiritual and personal self-discipline all the way to the finish line (vv.24-27). Principles abound! Let's do this together at DPC.

Chapter 10

Sin Beneath Sin. Paul has addressed disruptive issues in the church (ch.1-8): false gospel of religion & philosophy, polarizing factions, arrogance of autonomy, sexual immorality, neighborhood friction, marriage and singleness, and sensitive consciences (food offered to idols). The solution? Gospel-centric wisdom, deference and discipline (ch.9). Now Paul goes to the "*sin beneath sin*": idols of the heart (vv.6-7). How we ought to give thanks for the benefits of recorded history (vv.1-5). We stand on tall shoulders ("*fathers*") who in both success and failure serve as examples of "dangerous grace" (vv.6-12, the same grace that saves you also may stand to condemn you). Marvelous is God's mercy and compassion in temptation! (v.13; Did not Jesus teach us to pray this?) The exhortation is to "*flee*," not only for oneself but for the sake of the "one" body of Christ. Oneness (unity; note the number of times "one" is used) is not some quaint idea but a reflection of the gospel itself and one's experience of the gospel. The Christian cannot participate in Christ and also in idolatry (or appearances of idolatry), and if one does, we drag in the body of Christ thru the mud, even pulling apart what God has mysteriously and a great cost brought together. Bottom line? The "one" great commandment: love God, love others... "*do all to the glory of God.*"

Chapter 11

Apostolic Traditions (vv.1-3). It matters. Churches are not to wander off into a "do it yourself" doctrine and polity ("*Regulative Principle of Worship*"). Throughout this epistle Paul is concerned about a self-styled "spiritual maturity." "*Contextualization*" (9:19-23), yes; but he subordinates it to faithfulness to apostolic theology and practice. *Gender* (vv.3-15). Hairstyles or hats... dress codes? As confusing as the issue at Corinth may sound to us, the underlying question is: Is there a difference between equality and sameness, even as reflected in the Tri-unity of God Himself? Paul seems to teach such difference. In the context of the participation in worship, there's a strong note of mutual (reciprocal) respect as well as self-respect and order that honors one another and honors God. How might authentic gender characteristics created by God help "the other" to be more themselves, enhancing the body of Christ and its worship? *The Lord's Supper* (vv.17-34). Relational schisms and disorder (traditional dining practices, social & economic "classes"... even that "*one goes hungry, another gets drunk*") have the effect of undermining the very focus and purpose of the Sacrament, even to make a mockery of the meaning of the Supper. The positive way forward in an authentic gospel proclamation and experience, Paul says, is first, to be anchored in the very words and meaning of the Lord Jesus himself; and second, to examine oneself in relationship to Christ and to the body of Christ (in thought, word and deed).

Chapter 12

Criterion of Christlikeness (vv.1-3). Mouth in motion before the mind in gear. This is a problem in the Corinthian church, and such boasting of and redefining "spiritual maturity" as "*I've got the Spirit and you don't*") is a sure sign of just the opposite. It only fractures the unity of the church ("compare/despair") in demeaning and distancing kinds of ways. The litmus test? Does one's thoughts and life exhibit "Jesus as Lord"? What might it mean for me to call Christ

“Lord”? *Spiritual Gifts (4-11)*. For the practice of His Lordship and the building up the church in unity and effectiveness, the indwelling Holy Spirit gives to each believer special abilities. So Paul argues both “*E Pluribus Unum*” (out of the many, one) and its opposite (out of one “*same Spirit, same Lord, same God,*” the many). The beautiful kaleidoscope of gifts and functions serve to reflect the nature and presence of the Triune God. *The Way to Unity (vv. 12-30)* is a mutual valuing, respect and deference (interdependence), even cheerleading one another’s gifts! You need others (the church); likewise, others (the church) need you (your gift... they are helped in becoming more of what God intended). If Christians and their gifts are as “*limbs of Christ,*” then sin against a fellow Christian is not merely a social issue, but sin against Christ himself.

Chapter 13

A Better Way (12:31-13:3). “Zeal” – a perfect transition understood in two ways. One, instead of competitive envy, redirecting to this one gift everyone can possess – love (noncompetitive). Two, zeal for “spiritual gifts” needs to be extended to the greatest – love. Paul is saying, “if you’re really after more ‘spirituality,’ this is seen not only in living out Christ’s Lordship, but also in a life given over to the formation of these qualities of love (nature & action), which in essence is a concern and respect for “the other.” Anything other, our greatest efforts are nothing but misdirected and fruitless motion. *Portrait of Agape (4-7)*. Paul utilizes 3-dimensional word-art to describe the dynamic nature of this kind of love. Different than brotherly affection or romance, “agape” is unconditional, unstoppable, creative and without personal or cultural boundaries, rooted in nature and action of the free love of Christ. Take a moment to reflect upon the virtues of waiting (timing); on the warmth, generosity and purity of showing kindness; on the contamination of love by envy, self-importance and self-interest; on how love under pressure refuses to keep score of hurts nor becomes manipulative; on the constancy and tirelessness of love. *Permanence of Agape (8-13)*. When placed in the larger, cosmic scale of redemptive history, many good things, necessary things are only but fragmentary experiences, remedial tutors along the journey. But “spiritual maturity” means growing up into God’s kind of love, the permanent currency “*on earth as it is in heaven.*”

Chapter 14

Benefits of Love (1-5). How might “love” (ch. 13) make a difference in the way one desires for and exercises the gifts of the Spirit? Love harnesses and at the same time liberates, seeking always to “*build up*” rather than tear down (note the times “*built, build, building*” are used). If right materials are used on the foundation of Christ, such building lasts forever. Do we perceive building others as shaping the very landscape of eternity? *Intelligible Speech (5-19)*. Whether one believes the gift of “*tongues*” was confined to that redemptive-historical period or that they continue today (in either case, not all possess(ed) this gift, ch. 12), note the consistent emphasis and benefit of intelligibility for the sake of others (in the church and worship in particular). Paul uses 4 different figures of speech to illustrate his point. Can you identify them? *Spiritual Maturity (20-25)*. There is a difference between being “childlike” and “*childish.*” In what sense are the Corinthians being “*childish*”? Where was mature reflection absent? *Church order (26-40)*. Rather than narrow repression of the Spirit, as some suppose, wise structure actually makes provision for the expression of love and respect for others to exercise their spiritual gifts. Can anarchy or chaos ever be regarded as evidence that the Holy Spirit is “*at work*”? How might this infer the need for mature spiritual leadership in the church?

Chapter 15

Reality of the Resurrection (1-11) – A necessary reminder? Could it be that we must flip the coin... that the gospel of “justification” (no distinctions or merit badges allowed) is also the gospel of “transformation,” (the point of Paul’s epistle), both only possible because of the truth

and power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ? *Denying of the Resurrection (12-19)* The unacceptable consequence is that Christ is still in the grave, He was not God (Jesus lied), He was/is insufficient for the plight and penalty of sin and death, and therefore we are still subject to the judgment of God. Faith is but a hoax and there is no hope. *Hope of the Resurrection (20-34)* Confirmed! Christ is, in fact, "*prototokon*," (firstfruit, firstborn Rom.8:29, Col.1:18). Therefore, His resurrection is a pledge and assurance (representative) of a future resurrection of the dead in Christ. Follow Paul's logic: death in Adam, life in Christ. But the Lordship of Christ (validated in the resurrection) is more than "fire insurance": over all rule, authority and power (even death itself)... something larger than life, greater than self, and lasting forever – the kingdom of God. *Common Sense of the Resurrection (35-49)* Too good to be true? Just open your eyes to the lessons of the land. Beyond the Genesis of creation (1st Adam), Christ (last Adam) is giving us the new Spirit, bringing about the new humanity required to meet God face to face. *Victory of the Resurrection (50-58)* Do we see death as an ending or a new beginning? Think what Christ's saving work has absorbed for you: the sting, the venomous poison of the fear of death. In the words of Frances Shaeffer, "*How Should We Then Live?*"

Chapter 16

Now Concerning (1-18)– A frequent expression of Paul, indicating a reply to a question sent previously... but the "*collection*" is more than an appendix or afterthought. Theology (Resurrection) always expresses itself in mutuality and action (Acts 4:32-37). How about for you? The details here give one pause in thanksgiving for how beautifully the Lord shepherd's His church by the broad shoulders of His ordained officers (2 Cor.4:7-18). Paul's burden reflects both a tough and tender leadership (1 Cor.4:14-21): one, that the Lord's people demonstrate generosity proportionate to the prosperity He gives (2 Cor.8-9); two, that resources must get to the place of greatest need (Jerusalem at the time); three, the importance of delegation and service, according to one's gifts and opportunity (1 Cor.12); four, the priority of continued preaching & teaching (1 Cor.2:1-5) and the church's participation in "sending" the preachers and teachers (v.6); five, that others' work and partnership be held in honor and esteem (vv.10-11, 18). *Like Men (13)*– Paul is not demonstrating a "sexist" bias, but his exhortation reflects the necessity of strong men in leadership. "*As the men go, so goes the church*," and this from the beginning ("silence of Adam" and his legacy, Gen.3:1-7; 4ff); thus the qualifications of church officers (1 Tim.2:1-7; 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). God's men are to be both tough and tender; love always as motive and means (v.14). *Grace & Love (23-24)*– Grace produces love. Nothing in Paul's epistle is ever even possible apart from God's supply in Christ Jesus!

-Reflecting on 1 Corinthians-

Before moving on to our next book of the Bible, take some time today to reflect on what we've read in 1 Corinthians. Perhaps re-visit a favorite chapter or an especially meaningful passage. Or read the beginning chapter(s) again, now that you've read the whole. Or go back to a part of the book that struck you as curious and see if it makes more sense now. Or speed-read the whole thing again, seeking to reinforce its main themes. Or... perhaps you need a catch-up day to finish 1 Corinthians before we move forward?

"As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful." Matthew 13.22