

Hi friends,

1 Corinthians is a really rich part of God's word, but kind of complex to fully understand. It's going to be fantastic to dig deep into it in our Growth Groups and see how the gospel announcement of Jesus' death, resurrection and return shapes life for us today. Here are a few resources to help you navigate your way through.

St Helen's in London have been wonderfully generous with their resources. I commend to you their outstanding leaders notes on 1 Corinthians that follow our passage break-up quite closely. <https://www.st-helens.org.uk/resources/study/35/>

The Bible Project puts together excellent overview videos that can be useful for your preparation and helpful to use as a group to orient people to the overall sweep of the book. Their 1 Corinthians edition is at their usual standard, though I'd caution that at points they are a bit 'too neat' in trying to summarise the theology of the book, but it's still very helpful. <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/1-corinthians>

If you're looking for a reliable and helpful commentary, there are two standout options to consider (both happen to be by Australian authors!):

- *First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner.
 - This one's big and detailed (and expensive!), but very helpful theologically and pastorally. It happens to be out of stock in hard copy at most places at the moment, but can be obtained electronically.
- *1 Corinthians*, Focus On The Bible Commentary Series, Paul Barnett.
 - This one is cheaper to buy and easier to read, but still very useful. Probably has a bit more of a pastoral perspective than Ciampa and Rosner.

And now for a technical theological term which will be helpful in two ways: 1 - it will help you navigate this book. 2 – it will help 1 Corinthians inform your understanding of a key Christian doctrine. Allow me to very briefly introduce you to:

“Inaugurated Eschatology” (Inaugurated = begun, eschatology = end time)

In simpler terms, this is talking about the 'now but not yet' nature of the kingdom of God. With Jesus' life, death and resurrection the kingdom has 'come near' (Mark 1:15, Matt 12:28). The power of sin has been overcome, but the presence of sin remains an ongoing reality (Rom 8:18-25).

In gospel terms, this is recognizing that in his death and resurrection, Jesus is declared to be God's great king, ushering in the kingdom of God (eg: Rom 1:4; Acts 2:31-36). However, his kingdom won't be finally revealed in its un-opposed majesty until Jesus' returns (Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 15:24-28)

In practical terms, this reminds us what it means to be Christian: that we recognize Jesus as Lord (Rom 10:9; 2 Cor 4:5) as we live in 'the last days' (1 Pet 1:20, Heb 1:2) – in the overlap of time between when God's king has come and when he will return. The kingdom of God has broken into this present age, but is yet to be revealed in all its glory. Now, that might not sound terribly practical, but as we'll see in 1 Corinthians, inaugurated eschatology is THE perspective on our lives that should shape the way we live: as God's people living in the time between Jesus' resurrection and his return.

Finally, I want to encourage any of you who are up for the challenge to take on writing your own Bible studies. Working from the full study outline can make this difficult, because you end up just doing what we've suggested. With this in mind, you'll find a very simplified outline below. A suggested process for writing your own study using these outlines is:

- Pray!
- Use the first page of the St Helen's notes to give you some historical context.
- Read the whole book of 1 Corinthians and note any key and repeated themes. In particular, look out for the repeated themes of the cross of Christ, the return of Jesus, our physical bodies, God's love for the church, but you'll find others too!
- Use the outline below to identify the study for the given week.
- Read the passage for the study.
- Identify the structure, repeated ideas and words.
- Identify key themes of biblical theology (ie, does it quote from the OT? Does it use any major biblical themes?)
- Identify any key doctrinal areas that it raises (eg, the doctrine of the cross and the resurrection are vital to understanding 1 Corinthians, and 1 Corinthians is vital to understanding how these doctrines impact our lives).
- Think through what the key outcome the author (in this case Paul) intended for his audience, then consider whether the same applies to us or whether it shifts due to our place in salvation history and time and place. Consider application at a number of ways: first to you, then more generally to your group. Using categories of application can be helpful, such as things to Trust, Say, Do and Pray. Individual applications and community/church applications.
- Review with your resources – you might want to use the St Helen's notes, or the outlines below, or the full study guides we've provided, or a commentary. All of these are tools to help refine your observation and understanding of the passage, but don't be bound by them.
- Summarise your teaching goal: *At the end of this study I want the group to understand... and to make a change in...*
- Package your study:
 - Questions we ask are simply there to help people read the passage carefully.
 - Observation questions get people to slow down and notice key aspects they may have overlooked or taken for granted.
 - Meaning/understanding questions help people join the dots of the things they have observed, using things such as the context, any biblical theology themes or key doctrines to see how the passage teaches us.
 - Application questions take us from the text to our lives. Sometimes its helpful to keep these very wide and general, sometimes you'll see benefit in making them quite focused to a particular aspect of the study or a particular context in life.

If this feels like a helpful overview but you want a bit more detail, check out this very readable yet still quite comprehensive little book written by the Maturity Pastor at Hunter Bible Church in NSW:

Writing A Small Group Study by Richard Sweatman.

Study 1

1 Corinthians 1:1-17

The Big Idea: Two big things inform how we live: who we are in light of Jesus, and when we live with respect to Jesus.

This passage divides into 4 sections, which most of our translations show in different paragraphs and these structural sections identify key points to understand and shape our application.

This passage also introduces the key timeline markers that will come up again and again through 1 Corinthians as it looks back to the cross and forward to Jesus' return.

Study 2

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

The Big Idea: The Cross of Christ is at the center of it all.

1:18 is a topic sentence for this passage and sums up most of what we need to understand.

For a group that wants to be stretched there is some real pearls to be discovered if you track down the OT quotes and see them in their contexts, but this isn't essential to following the basic line of Paul's point.

Study 3

1 Corinthians 2:6-16

The Big Idea: The Cross of Christ is where God gives us the greatest insight into who he is and what he is like.

The danger of this passage is to read it forgetting the context of what Paul's already said so far, which might mean we read 2:11-12 and think we each need some special message from God beamed into our heads by the Spirit. So make sure to put this passage in its context.

Study 4

1 Corinthians 3:1-23

The Big Idea: The church (ie, the people, not the building) is God's temple, the house where God lives.

3:16-17 is a key summary sentence for this study. Don't overlook just how remarkable this statement is, especially when we keep in mind just how 'off the rails' the Corinthian church was.

Study 5

1 Corinthians 4:1-21

The Big Idea: "Each will receive their praise from God."

One of the challenges with this passage is working out where Paul is being sarcastic (such as in v8). Look for repeated emphasis of pride vs humility to help make sense of what Paul's saying.

Study 6

1 Corinthians 5:1-13

The Big Idea: The church is called to be a distinctive people as we live between Christ's death and his return, which means we need to take sin seriously.

One word of caution with this passage: Paul does not argue the case of whether the man's behaviour is sinful or what is sinful about it, he just assumes that his readers get this (because at one level, even the pagan's get it). His point is not whether incest is sinful it is how the church should be responding to such open and unrepentant sin. This is helpful to note because this study could be derailed if you were expecting the passage to teach us how to make moral judgments of whether a particular behaviour is immoral. We need to look elsewhere to do that – though if you really want to chase it down, there are lots of OT connections here that give us insight into how Paul uses Leviticus 18:7-8 and Deuteronomy 27:10 to inform his sexual ethics. However, its helpful to note that Paul never commands Christians to obey these laws as laws (eg, the NT Church doesn't stone the sinner to death, they seek his redemption), but these clearly inform our understanding of God's expectations for moral living.

Study 7

1 Corinthians 6:1-20

The Big Idea: We are not our own, we belong to God, called to live as citizens of his kingdom for his glory.

This chapter includes some of the best memory verses in the whole book. They sum up the main points well and are worth reflecting on:

"...And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." 1 Cor 6:11

"You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies." 1 Cor 6:19-20

Study 8

1 Corinthians 7:1-24

The Big Idea: Marriage is a context for living in godliness.

We've broken chapter 7 into two sections to slow down and digest it a little more thoroughly. However this runs the risk of missing the connections that run through the whole chapter. 7:17-24 are very helpful to note how Paul inserts two other key category contrasts (circumcised/uncircumcised and slave/free) alongside the contrast of married/unmarried to show how the principles applied to marriage and singleness are examples of a wider desire to exercise undivided devotion to God and his purpose. As such, while this first half says a lot about marriage and divorce, at its core it is a call to honour God in the context of marriage.

7:4 needs to be read carefully. Living as we do in a society with a terrible problem with domestic violence, the mutual responsibility of this verse is a corrective to those who would seek to manipulate, dominate or abuse their spouse. Neither partner (usually the male in our context) can demand sex on the basis of this passage because the other spouse can rightly assert their own authority over the first person's body and say no. The point is still very counter cultural though – we don't have exclusive rights to our own body. They are to be used in the service of others: first, all Christians to God (6:19-20), second, married Christian to their spouse (7:4). If it is jarringly countercultural now, it was just as countercultural then (though then the jarring aspect was more the idea the wife had any claim over her husband). An interesting parallel is found in Song of Solomon 2:16 and 6:3, where it is inherently positive.

Study 9

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

The Big Idea: God calls his people to live with undivided devotion to him and his purposes.

As with the comments on the previous study, don't forget the wider context of chapter 7 as a whole that helps us see the key point of being undivided in devotion to God and his purposes, whatever our situation in life.