

**Bible Study**  
**1 Corinthians 1 - 7**



Trinity Church Adelaide  
2021

# 1 Corinthians: “Church off the Rails”

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What is it like to be a church trying to live in response to the gospel when the culture around us is so vastly different from the way God would have us live? And what about when every member of church has some kind of baggage from life in the world that we bring into life in the church? What does it mean to be totally transformed by the historical event of the death and resurrection of Jesus when our neighbours think it's a fool's tale? How should the imminent return of Jesus – whenever that might happen – impact life when we're really not sure when it's actually going to happen?

If you think these questions are the kind of things we're grappling with at Trinity in 21st century Adelaide, well you'll soon see that we've got a lot in common with the 1<sup>st</sup> century Corinthians. This was a church full of challenges and, as becomes clear from Paul's letter to them, they were pretty 'off the rails' in a number of ways. But they could still be described as "those sanctified in Christ Jesus" and "the temple of the Holy Spirit."

1 Corinthians is one of the earliest Christian writings we have – one of the oldest books of the New Testament. Paul had planted the church in Corinth over an 18-month period in AD 49-51, only 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. We know from 5:9 that Paul had written a letter to the Corinthians, which was lost to history, but then he received reports of how the church was going (see 1:11 and 16:17) that prompted him to write what we now have as 1 Corinthians, probably written sometime between AD 52 and 55. The point of this history is to note that every member of this church was a 'young' Christian, in a culture so radically different from the call of God on his people. This is a letter for Christians working out how the Christ – his crucifixion, his resurrection and ours with him – teaches us to live as those set apart by God for his glorious purposes.

With this in mind, you'll find a question repeated through the studies that follow, because sometimes it's helpful to see how the same basic framework shapes so much of what God has to say to us through this letter. In Chapter 1 Paul highlighted the central importance of the cross of Christ. In Chapter 15 Paul gives his most detailed treatment of the implications of Jesus' resurrection for our future resurrection. And for all the problems of the church in Corinth, and all that God will have to challenge and encourage us too, it is these two key markers in the

passage of history that frame everything that we read: how do we live in light of Jesus' death on the cross and his imminent return? So let's dive in, confident that, whatever problems our church may have, "He will also keep [us] firm to the end... God is faithful, who has called [us] into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." (1:8-9)

## **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.

Complete the table on the next page, to get an overview of the flow of Paul's thought, remembering from our introduction that this letter was written to a church that is 'off the rails' in a number of ways.

Verses	Focus question:	Overall question:
1-3	Who are they?	How does this help correct a church 'off the rails'?
4-9	What has God done for them?	How does this help correct a church 'off the rails'?
10-12	What has divided them?	How does this help correct a church 'off the rails'?
13-17	What should unite them?	How does this help correct a church 'off the rails'?

Read over this passage again but this time take note of the ways that Paul references three key points in time: Jesus' death on the cross, our present age, the return of Jesus. What does he say about our present behaviour in light of the Jesus' cross and Jesus' return?

The Cross	Our Present Age	Jesus' Return

In light of what we've read, what warnings may there be for us to avoid being a 'church off the rails'?

1 Corinthians frames our lives between the past events of Jesus' death and resurrection and the future event of his return and our resurrection with him. How does this study challenge you to live this week in between these two events in history?

Pray for our responses to this as a church and as individuals.

## Study 2 - 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

### **The Big Idea: The Cross of Christ is at the centre of it all.**

Reflection question: What reflections do you have on what it means for us to be living between the Cross of Christ and his final return?

Paul concluded his previous line of thought appealing to the Corinthians to be united – not around a particular church leader, but around Jesus himself. He summed up in 1:17

*For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*

This then introduces the next major block in what the Corinthians needed to hear: the call to unity within the church is a call to unity around the cross of Christ. Paul recognises, however, that this will not always be appealing!

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

1:18 is like a topic sentence as Paul states his point in concise terms, which Paul then expands on through 1:19-25 and then explores the implication of in 1:26-2:5.

First, let's consider v19-25.

In verse 19 Paul quotes from Isaiah 29, written 700 years before Jesus, where God is expressing judgment on Israel's religious leaders who led the people astray. They were proud of their religious activities, yet their hearts were far from God. Through Isaiah God warned of judgement in the form of confusion and surprise – he would show that he was really the one in charge while at the same time making himself known to those who might be least expected to understand him.

From v20-21,

- What do we learn about human inability to know God?

From v21-25,

- What is the thing that is considered foolishness and weakness by the world, but is actually the wisdom and power of God?
- In what sense does it seem foolish and weak?
- In what sense is it actually a demonstration of God's wisdom and power?
- How have you experienced this yourself, perhaps in your own thinking, or in conversations with unbelievers, or even just your fears of what they might think?

Now let's look at the implications Paul draws from this in 1:26-2:5. Here Paul takes the basic principle that God upends our normal concept of foolish and wise, weak and powerful, unworthy and worthy, and he applies this to relationships in the church. While he acknowledges that 'not many of you were wise... influential... noble' this is also a subtle way of recognising that some of the Christians in Corinth actually were these things. But because God has changed our perspective on what is wise and what is foolish, everyone needs to see things differently regardless of whether or not we're considered important in the world's eyes.

Bearing this in mind,

- How would you put the main point of v28-31 in your own words?



- How would this challenge those Corinthians who thought of themselves as important?
  
- How would this challenge those Corinthians who thought of themselves as inferior?

In the final paragraph of our reading Paul illustrates the point from his own ministry.

- It's pretty clear that Paul is actually quite eloquent! (The final paragraph of chapter 1 is just one good example of this.) What do you think he means by v1-2?
  
- Paul says his message came with 'a demonstration of the Spirit's power' but he's already said that he didn't conform to the usual expectations that people had for miraculous signs or profound wisdom (see 1:22-24). In this context, what is 'the power of God' that was evident? (see 1 Thess 1:5-6 for a comparable experience).

Summing all this up:

- From 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5, what does it mean to have your faith rest, not on human wisdom, but on God's power?
- What is one way that you might live in light of the challenge: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord"?
- How can we pray for one another to share this conviction?
- How can we pray for our church leadership to share this conviction?

## 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.**

Reflection question: What's it meant for you to 'boast in the Lord' this week? Have you had any reflections on what it means for the Cross of Christ to be the evidence of God's power?

Read 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

Last study we saw Paul emphasise that he wasn't trying to use an argument based on human wisdom, he was committed to preaching the "foolish" message of the cross. Now he explains that this "foolishness" is actually the revelation of God's wisdom.

From v6-11

- What is the contrast that Paul makes in v6-7?
- How does v10 fulfill the expectation of v9?
- What does v11 teach us about how we know God?
- If we just had v11 on its own, it might seem like we each need a special message from God beamed into our heads by the Spirit of God. However, what has Paul said so far in 1 Corinthians about the message that God has given? What has he described as the wisdom and power of God?

It seems that the Corinthians may have been complaining that this was all just a bit unimpressive (1:22 suggests this was the case), so in v16 Paul quotes Isaiah 40:13 to point out that we need to be careful about arguing the point with God.

Read Isaiah 40:9-14

- What is the message that was being declared in v9-11?
  
- What is the implied answer to all the questions being asked in v12-14 and therefore what is the implied answer to the question in 1 Cor 2:16? How does that contribute to Paul's point?
  
- What is surprising about the answer Paul provides in the second half of v16?
  
- Given Paul's emphasis on the cross of Christ so far in 1 Corinthians, what do you think he means when he says that Christians 'have the mind of Christ'? To put it another way, how does the cross of Christ reveal to us the mindset, attitude and priorities of Christ Jesus?

While Paul is currently addressing a particular issue of divisions within the Corinthian church, the rest of the letter will show time and again how he applies the wisdom and power of the Cross to all kinds of practical matters. Use the following headings to take a few moments to consider how Jesus' death on the cross reveals to us what God is like, what Christ is like, and what it would mean for us to have our minds informed by the wisdom of the cross:

- Trust: What does the cross reveal about the mind of Christ that teaches us what it means to trust God?
  
- Say: What does the cross reveal about the mind of Christ that teaches us how he would have us speak?
  
- Do: What does the cross reveal about the mind of Christ to shape the way we behave?
  
- Pray: What does the cross reveal about the mind of Christ to inform the way we pray?

## Study 4 - 1 Corinthians 3:1-23

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

Reflection question:

How has God used the "foolish" message of the cross to grow you in wisdom for living his way?

Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-23

Paul returns to the issue of division in the Corinthian church and takes aim at people who have divided into camps depending on which leader they prefer – in this case Paul or Apollos. Verse 9 is a summary verse for this chapter where he defines the role of church leaders as "co-workers in God's service" and the church as "God's field, God's building". In v6-8 he uses the image of a field, and in v10-17 he uses the image of a building.

From v6-8:

- How does Paul describe the role of church leaders in this section?
- Who is responsible for, and gets the glory for, the growth?
- Paul is using this image as an illustration of church life. What does this teach us about 'planting' and 'watering' in the church?
- [For further thinking... where else in the Bible have you come across the idea of God having a garden to be well cared for?]

From v10-17:

- What does Paul say about the foundations of the building?
- What does Paul say about the materials used for the building?
- In v8 Paul briefly mentioned the reward the servants would receive for their labor. How does he expand on that here in v12-15?
- In v16-17 Paul clarifies the image of a building that he's been using. It's not just any old building, but a very special one: God's temple. What do we learn from these two verses about the church in Corinth?

In v18-23 Paul steps back from the metaphors of the field and the building to speak directly to the Corinthians again about their concern to look 'wise' in the world's eyes.

- How have the descriptions of the church as God's field and God's building added to the basic point he makes in v21: "No more boasting about human leaders!"

The Corinthians were lining themselves up behind their leaders, as if they were gaining prestige based on who they belonged to. Instead, Paul turns this on its head and sums up that their leaders – whether Paul or Apollos – belong to them, serving them as part of the way God enables them grow. In fact, as God’s field and temple, God is so committed to the wellbeing of his church that he will use all means possible to grow them. So Paul says in v21-22 that “all things are yours” in the sense that all things are used by God to meet his goal for growth in them: Not only their church leaders, but even the challenges of their mortality in this life (represented by “the world or life or death”) and the perspective of history under God’s control (the present age as in 2:6-8, while the future is the promise of Christ’s return as alluded to in 3:8 and 13). God uses all things to grow his people in Christ, so the only person the Corinthians should be lining up behind is Christ, who demonstrates his own mindset as he himself lines up behind his Father (v23).

Summing it up:

- Read v16-17 again. Remember that Paul is writing to a local church congregation that had lots of issues. Even though they’ve got lots of issues, this is a very positive view of church and how much it matters to God. How often do you think of our local church with this kind of significance? What practical differences might be called for if you gave church this kind of priority?
  
- What has stood out to you from this chapter about the role of church leaders? How can we be praying for our leadership at Trinity Church Adelaide?



## Study 5 - 1 Corinthians 4:1-21

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

Reflection Question: How have you gone thinking about church with the kind of priority that God gives it?

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

- In v1, how does Paul describe himself and fellow leaders? ("us" probably includes the other leaders like Apollos and Cephas/Peter that he's already mentioned)
- In verse 2 he states that such people "must prove faithful", but whose opinion is he concerned about?
- What does v4 teach us about the role of our conscience?
- How would you sum up the point of this paragraph? What did this mean for the Corinthians who were comparing their leaders and dividing the church based on who they followed?

- Paul certainly doesn't think that church leaders should never be held to account. (For example Gal 1:9; Tit 1:5-9; Acts 20:28-31). From the context of 1 Corinthians so far, what would be markers of faithful leadership? What things were the Corinthians looking for in their leaders that were irrelevant?

#### Read 1 Corinthians 4:6-21

- Paul's comment about the saying "Do not go beyond what is written" can seem a bit obscure! However, look back over the Old Testament quotations he has used so far in 1 Corinthians (1:19, 31; 2:9, 16; 3:19, 20). What is the consistent message of these quotes and how does this clarify what Paul is saying here in v6?
- Clearly pride is a problem for the Corinthians. Paul doesn't want them to be "puffed up" in v6, and in v8-13 we see a number of ways they've become quite self-assured, while in v18-19 there is the issue of some particularly arrogant members. How does Paul contrast the 'cross shaped' ministry of the apostles with the 'puffed up' perspective of the Corinthians?
- In v14 Paul states that his desire is "to warn you as my dear children." How would you sum up the core warning of this chapter? What is his big concern for the Corinthians?

- [For extension: The word translated 'warning' here is used 8 times in the New Testament – 7 in Paul's letters and once in his speech to the Ephesian elders. Read the following passages to see how he uses this word to round out our understanding of what he's trying to do for the Corinthians, as his dear children: Acts 20:31; Rom 15:14; 1 Cor 4:14; Col 1:28, 3:16; 1 Thes 5:12, 14; 2Thes 3:15]
- [For extension: We might think Paul sounds a bit arrogant himself in v21 and wonder "Who does he think he is to talk about coming with a rod of discipline?" However, reflect on the way he has described his relationship with the Corinthians in 4:14-15 in light of Prov 22:15 and 23:13-14.]

#### Summing it up:

- How does the cross of Christ, as the wisdom and power of God, grow us in humility?
- How does the return of Christ, as the ultimate destination of history, grow us in humility?
- 1 Corinthians frames our lives between the past events of Jesus' death and resurrection and the future event of his return and our resurrection with him. How does this study challenge you to live this week in between these two events in history?

## 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.**

Reflection Question: Over this last week have you had to confront your own pride in the way that you've evaluated others or thought about yourself? How did Jesus' death on the cross and his imminent return help correct your thinking?

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

V1 introduces the second concern that Paul has had reported to him about the state of play in Corinth (see the first mentioned in 1:11).

- What is the problem described in v1?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What is the bigger problem described in v2? Who is Paul actually rebuking in this chapter?

Paul does not argue the case of whether or why the man's behaviour is sinful. He assumes the Corinthians are in agreement with him that this man's sexual relationship with his step mother is a form of sexual immorality. Paul's greater concern is that the church has not responded appropriately to this.

Having spent most of the first 4 chapters of 1 Corinthians encouraging the church in unity and overcoming division, this chapter may make us feel uncomfortable because it seems to do the opposite: it singles out one man who should be divided off from the rest. Paul repeats one basic instruction five times over: "put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this" (v2), "hand this man over to Satan" (v5), "get rid of the old yeast" (v6), "you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral..." (v11), "Expel the wicked person from among you" (v13). The repetition certainly makes the point, but it also enables us to see the reason for such a strong instruction.

Re-read 1 Corinthians 5:1-5

- What was the Corinthian church instructed to do to the man involved in this ongoing and unrepentant sin? (note that the woman is not mentioned, indicating that she is an unbeliever who is not being held to the same expectations – consistent with v12)
  
- What is the end goal and hope for the man? This implies that the church's failure to take this man's sin seriously put him in danger. What was the danger for the man involved?

Re-read 1 Corinthians 5:6-8

We might recognise that Paul is referencing some key Old Testament ideas here when he mentions unleavened bread and the Passover. If you need some background, read Exodus 12:21-27 to understand the meaning of the Passover and Exodus 13:3-10 to understand the meaning of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, which went together as a combined commemoration. In short, the Passover reminded Israel that God had 'passed over' them in judgment, while the unleavened bread reminded Israel that God had brought them out of the dominion of Egypt into a new life as his people, with yeast often used as a metaphor for the pervasive nature of sin (eg Luke 12:1).

- What was the danger to the church in not taking this man's sin seriously?

- From v7, the Christians in Corinth were told to 'get rid of the old yeast', but was this to make themselves unleavened, or because they are unleavened?

Re-read 1 Corinthians 5:9-13

5:9 indicates that the letter we know as 1 Corinthians is not actually the first letter Paul has written to this church. In a previous letter he has given a warning not to associate with sexually immoral people, but it seems he's been misunderstood.

- What did Paul mean and how was he misunderstood?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- How might this misunderstanding pose a danger to our relationships with non-believers?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- How does this picture of distinctive Christian community reflect the way Paul addressed the Corinthians in 1:2?



## 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.**

Reflection Question: How have you been challenged to consider how we respond to sin in your own lives? In the life of our church?

At first glance it can feel like 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 is a bit out of place. In Chapter 5 Paul has been addressing a particular issue of sexual immorality and Chapter 7 carries on the topic of sex and marriage. So a couple of paragraphs about civil law suits does seem a bit 'left field'.

But remember that Chapter 5 ended with an encouragement to exercise discernment within the congregation – making sure the church deals with open and unrepentant sin. Well, that provides a perfect link to the next issue Paul's had reported to him about the Corinthians: They're not only creating divisions based on their leaders, but they're in conflict with each other and looking outside the church to sort that out. If Chapter 5 was about a failure to separate from an unrepentant sinner who claims to be a Christian, these early verses of Chapter 6 are about the tendency to separate from each other for very trivial reasons (even if the world might not think those reasons are trivial).

Read 1 Corinthians 6:1-8

- From what we read here, what was the problem Paul was addressing?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- From v2-3 in particular, how should the return of Jesus shape their perspective?



- In v6-8 Paul says such conflict “means you have been completely defeated already.” Although the cross of Christ is not specifically mentioned here, how does the ‘mind of Christ’ (from 2:16) show how radically wrong they were to pursue their conflict with each other?

Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-20

- What is so serious about the patterns of life spoken of in v9-10? How does the second half of this list speak into the situation of the lawsuits already mentioned? How does the first half of this list speak into the situation of chapter 5?
- How does v11 provide good news for the Corinthians?
- From v12-13, how were the Corinthians trying to justify their worldly immorality?
- What is the underlying principle of Paul’s antidote to that incorrect Corinthian theology?

- In v19-20 Paul describes a Christian's body as a temple of the Holy Spirit. What is the 'take home message' from this? How is this similar to and different from 3:16-17 where he described the local church as the temple of the Holy Spirit?

This chapter includes some of the best memory verses in the whole book. Commit one, or both, of these to memory in the week to come:

"...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

- What stands out to you from these two summary statements?
- How might it change your perspective to have them memorised and imprinted on your mind?
- How could you encourage someone this week by sharing these verses with them?
- How might we pray in light of these?

## Study 8 - 1 Corinthians 7:1-24

**The Big Idea: Marriage is a context for living in godly response to the gospel.**

Reflection Question: How were you encouraged by last week's memory verses? Did you get a chance to encourage someone with them?

1 Corinthians 7:1 begins an important shift in the letter. Up to this point Paul has been dealing with things that have been reported about the Corinthians (their division, their toleration of unrepentant sin, their conflict in the law courts) and now he starts responding to a number of questions they've raised with him. But that doesn't mean it's disconnected from what he's already said. It is good for us to remember that he is a gifted pastor and he is carefully guiding and correcting his people, so we should be on the lookout for how he builds on ideas and themes he's already introduced.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-24

In this first half of chapter 7 Paul mainly engages with questions for Christians who are married. He introduces the basic idea of the benefits and challenges of singleness in v8, though he won't expand on that until the second half of the chapter that we'll look at in the next study.

- Summarise Paul's advice from these paragraphs, in your own words:

- V1-7

- V8-9

- V10-11

- V12-16

- V17-24

- V4 needs to be read carefully. Living as we do in a society with a terrible problem with domestic violence, how is the mutual responsibility of this verse a clear corrective to those who would seek to manipulate, dominate or abuse their spouse?

- How can we affirm the goodness of both marriage and singleness amongst our church community?
  
- How can we support Christians in our church who are married to unbelievers?
  
- How can we encourage godliness in marriage for members of our church?
  
- 1 Corinthians frames our lives between the past events of Jesus' death and resurrection and the future event of his return and our resurrection with him. How does this study challenge you to live this week in between these two events in history?

## Study 9 - 1 Corinthians 7:25-40

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

Reflection Question: What questions have been raised for you around marriage and singleness? Where do you see God challenging us as Trinity Church Adelaide to grow and change in light of what we've been learning from 1 Corinthians?

- Summarise Paul's advice from these paragraphs, in your own words:
  - v25-31

- v32-35

- v36-40

- How should the single-minded devotion of the single person also inform the perspective of a married person?
- How do these perspectives and priorities contrast with what our society says about marriage and singleness and sex and abstinence?
- Remember the repetition of v17, 20 and 24, which bracketed Paul's examples of Jew/Gentile and slave/free and led into this discussion on marriage/singleness. It's hard to think of three bigger social categories for Paul to address in that context. How do v29-31 challenge us to put all our major category distinctions into fresh perspective?
- While Chapter 7 addresses key questions about marriage and singleness, we've also seen that it has more on view than marital status. How would you sum up God's underlying concern for his people? What would it look like to bring your priorities into line with his?

And once more, for good measure, let's keep grappling with the overarching framework that God has given us through this wonderfully rich letter...

- 1 Corinthians frames our lives between the past events of Jesus' death and resurrection and the future event of his return and our resurrection with him. How does this study challenge you to live this week in between these two events in history?

