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## SERIES ENDORSEMENTS

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THE LECTIO CONTINUA  
EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

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# First Corinthians

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Kim Riddlebarger

*Series Editor*  
Jon D. Payne



TOLLE LEGE PRESS  
POWDER SPRINGS, GEORGIA

THE LECTIO CONTINUA EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY SERIES

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## First Corinthians

by Kim Riddlebarger

Series Editor: Jon D. Payne

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# Contents

SERIES INTRODUCTION		xv
PREFACE		xxi
INTRODUCTION		xxiii
1 Greetings from Paul	<i>1:1-3</i>	1
2 Be United	<i>1:4-17</i>	11
3 The Wisdom of God	<i>1:18-31</i>	25
4 Jesus Christ and Him Crucified	<i>2:1-5</i>	43
5 For the Spirit Searches Everything	<i>2:6-16</i>	61
6 The Foundation	<i>3:1-15</i>	77
7 You Are God's Temple	<i>3:16-23</i>	91
8 For the Kingdom of God Does not Consist in Talk but in Power	<i>4:1-21</i>	105
9 God Judges Those Outside	<i>5:1-13</i>	119
10 And Such Were Some of You	<i>6:1-11</i>	135
11 You Were Bought With a Price	<i>6:12-20</i>	151
12 Each Has His Own Gift from God	<i>7:1-16</i>	165
13 Do Not Become Bondservants to Men	<i>7:17-40</i>	181
14 There Is One God	<i>8:1-13</i>	197
15 For the Sake of the Gospel	<i>9:1-27</i>	211

# Contents

16	The Rock Was Christ	<i>10:1–13</i>	227
17	Do All to the Glory of God	<i>10:14–33</i>	243
18	The Image and Glory of God	<i>11:1–16</i>	257
19	Until He Comes	<i>11:17–26</i>	273
20	Let a Person Examine Himself	<i>11:27–34</i>	287
21	Jesus is Lord	<i>12:1–3</i>	303
22	The Common Good	<i>12:4–11</i>	315
23	One Body, Many Members	<i>12:12–26</i>	329
24	Earnestly Desire the Higher Gifts	<i>12:27–31</i>	343
25	The Greatest of These is Love	<i>13:1–13</i>	357
26	Strive to Excel in Building Up the Church	<i>14:1–19</i>	373
27	Decently and In Order	<i>14:20–40</i>	387
28	The Gospel	<i>15:1–11</i>	401
29	Christ Has Been Raised!	<i>15:12–34</i>	417
30	He Must Reign	<i>15:20–28</i>	433
31	In the Twinkling of an Eye	<i>15:35–38</i>	447
32	Be Watchful	<i>16:1–24</i>	463

## Series Introduction

The greatest need of the church today is the recovery of sound biblical preaching that faithfully explains and applies the text, courageously confronts sin, and boldly trumpets forth the sovereign majesty, law, and promises of God. This type of powerful preaching has vanished in many quarters of the evangelical church only to be replaced by that which is anemic and man-centered. Instead of doctrinally rich exposition which strengthens faith and fosters Christian maturity, the standard fare has become informal, chatty, anecdote-laden messages, leaving unbelievers confused, and believers in a state of chronic spiritual adolescence.<sup>1</sup>

There is indeed a dire need for the recovery of solid biblical preaching. Not only does reformation of this sort lead Christ's sheep back to the verdant pastures of His soul-nourishing Word, it also provides a good example to future generations of ministers. For this reason, I am pleased to introduce *The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament* (LCECNT), a new series of expository commentaries authored by an array of seasoned pastor-scholars from various Reformed denominations on both sides of the Atlantic.

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1. A stinging, yet constructive critique of modern-day preaching is found in T. David Gordon's *Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009). "I have come to recognize that many, many individuals today have never been under a steady diet of competent preaching. . . . As starving children in Manila sift through the landfill for food, Christians in many churches today have never experienced genuine soul-nourishing preaching, and so they just pick away at what is available to them, trying to find a morsel of spiritual sustenance or helpful counsel here or there" (Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach*, 17).

## FIRST CORINTHIANS

What is the *lectio continua* method of preaching? It is simply the uninterrupted, systematic, expository proclamation of God's Word—verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book. It is a system, unlike topical or thematic preaching, that endeavors to deliver the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26–27). Christian discipleship is impoverished when large portions of Scripture are ignored. Carried out faithfully, the *lectio continua* method ensures that every passage is mined for its riches (even those verses which are obscure, controversial, or hard to swallow). Paul states that “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

*Lectio continua* preaching has a splendid heritage. It finds its roots in the early church and patristic eras. Its use, however, was revived and greatly expanded during the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. When Huldrych Zwingli (d. 1531) arrived at the Zurich Grossmünster in 1519, it was his desire to dispense with the standard lectionary and introduce *lectio continua* preaching to his congregation by moving systematically through the Gospel of Matthew. At first, some members of his church council were suspicious. They were uncomfortable replacing the lectionary with this seemingly new approach. But Zwingli explained that the *lectio continua* method of preaching was not new at all. On the contrary, important figures such as Augustine (d. 430), Chrysostom (d. 407) and Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) all employed this homiletical strategy. Zwingli is quoted by his successor Heinrich Bullinger (d. 1575) as saying that “no friend of evangelical truth could have any reason to complain” about such a method.<sup>2</sup>

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2. It is interesting to note that, the year before Zwingli began preaching sequentially through books of the Bible, he had received a new edition of Chrysostom's *lectio continua* sermons on Matthew's Gospel. See Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Black Mountain, NC: Worship

## Series Introduction

Zwingli rightly believed that the quickest way to restore biblical Christianity to the church was to preach the whole counsel of God verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book, Lord's Day after Lord's Day, year after year. Other reformers agreed and followed his pattern. In the city of Strasbourg, just ninety miles north of Zurich, men such as Martin Bucer (d. 1551), Wolfgang Capito (d. 1570), and Kaspar Hedio (d. 1552) practiced *lectio continua* preaching. Johannes Oecolampadius (d. 1531) boldly preached the *lectio continua* in Basel. And let us not forget John Calvin (d. 1564); between 1549 and 1564, the Genevan reformer preached sequentially through no fewer than twenty-five books of the Bible (over 2,000 sermons).<sup>3</sup>

The example of these reformers has been emulated by preachers throughout the centuries, from the Post-Reformation age down to the present. In the last half of the twentieth century, Martyn Lloyd-Jones (d. 1981), William Still (d. 1997), James Montgomery Boice (d. 2000), and John MacArthur all boldly marched straight through books of the Bible from their pulpits. But why? Surely we have acquired better, more contemporary methods of preaching? Is the *lectio continua* relevant in our twenty-first century context? In a day when biblical preaching is being increasingly undermined and marginalized by media/story/therapy/personality-driven sermons, even among the avowedly Reformed, these are important questions to consider.

Shortly before the Apostle Paul was martyred in Rome by Emperor Nero, he penned a second epistle to Timothy. In what proved to be some of his final words to his young disciple, he

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Press, 2004), 195. Cf. Old's *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 4: *The Age of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), and Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 228–253. Elements of this introduction are adapted from Jon D. Payne, "The Roaring of Christ through *Lectio Continua* Preaching," *Modern Reformation* (Nov./Dec. 2010; Vol. 19, No. 6): 23–24, and are used by permission of the publisher.

3. T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 159.

## FIRST CORINTHIANS

wrote, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus . . . *preach the word*; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:1–2). This directive was not meant for only Timothy. No, it is the primary duty of every Christian minister (and church) to carefully heed and obey these timeless words; according to God’s divine blueprint for ministry, it is chiefly through the faithful proclamation of the Word that Christ saves, sanctifies, and comforts the beloved Church for which He died.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments are the divinely sanctioned and efficacious means by which Christ and all His benefits of redemption are communicated to the elect. For this reason alone the *lectio continua* method of preaching should be the predominant, regular practice of our churches, providing a steady diet of Law and Gospel from the entirety of God’s Word.

Some may ask, “Why another expository commentary series?” First, because in every generation it is highly valuable to provide fresh, doctrinally sound, and reliable expositions of God’s Word. Every age possesses its own set of theological, ecclesiastical, and cultural challenges. In addition, it is beneficial for both current and rising ministers in every generation to have trustworthy contemporary models of biblical preaching. Second, the LCECNT uniquely features the expositions of an array of pastors from a variety of Reformed and confessional traditions. Consequently, this series brings a wealth of exegetical, confessional, cultural, and practical insight, and furnishes the reader with an instructive and stimulating selection of *lectio continua* sermons.

This series is not meant to be an academic or highly technical commentary. There are many helpful exegetical commentaries

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4. See Matthew 28:18–20; Romans 10:14–17; 1 Corinthians 1:18–21; 1 Peter 1:22–25, 2:2–3; Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 89.

## *Series Introduction*

written for that purpose. Rather, the aim is to provide *lectio continua* sermons, originally delivered to Reformed congregations, which clearly and faithfully communicate the context, meaning, gravity, and application of God's inerrant Word. Each volume of expositions aspires to be redemptive-historical, covenantal, Reformed and confessional, trinitarian, person-and-work-of-Christ-centered, and teeming with practical application. Therefore, the series will be a profound blessing to every Christian believer who longs to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18).

A project of this magnitude does not happen without the significant contributions of many people. First, I want to thank Raymond, Brandon, and Jared Vallorani of Tolle Lege Press. Their willingness to publish this voluminous set of commentaries is less about their desire to blossom as a Reformed publishing house and more about their sincere love for Christ and the faithful proclamation of the Bible. Also, many thanks to my fellow preachers who graciously agreed to participate in this series. It is a privilege to labor with you for the sake of the Gospel, the health and extension of the church, and the recovery of *lectio continua* preaching. Thanks to the editorial staff of Tolle Lege Press, especially Eric Rauch, Vice President of Publishing and Michael Minkoff, Director of Publishing. Thanks are also due to Brian Cosby for his detailed editorial contributions.

Thanks also must be given to the elders and congregation of Grace Presbyterian Church, Douglasville, Georgia, for warmly encouraging their minister to work on this time-consuming, yet beneficial, undertaking. Furthermore, I would like to express the deepest gratitude to my dear wife, Marla, and our two precious children, Mary Hannah and Hans. The peace and joy in our home, nurtured by delightful Lord's Days, regular family worship, and a loving, patient wife, makes editing a series like this one possible.

## FIRST CORINTHIANS

Finally, and most importantly, sincere thanks and praise must be given to our blessed triune God, the eternal fountain of all grace and truth. By his sovereign love and mercy, through faith in the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ, we have been “born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for ‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.’ And this word is the good news *that was preached to you*” (1 Pet. 1:23–25).

Jon D. Payne  
*Series Editor*

# Preface

It is an honor and a privilege to contribute this volume on 1 Corinthians for the *Lectio Continua* series. My contribution is based upon a series of Bible studies from 2004 and sermons preached on 1 Corinthians in 2010–2011 to the saints at Christ Reformed Church in Anaheim, California (URCNA), where I am currently senior pastor.

The goal of *Lectio Continua* is “simply the uninterrupted, systematic, expository proclamation of God’s Word—verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book. It is a system, unlike topical or thematic preaching, that endeavors to deliver the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26–27).”<sup>1</sup> It is a great joy to preach on the Lord’s Day to a congregation which both expects and desires the exposition of God’s word such as that just described. Would that all pastors be as blessed in this regard as I am.

I should point out that I am not an original thinker, but I am not afraid of departing from the received tradition in those few instances where I think a better explanation for Paul’s line of thinking arises from the biblical text, or from the historical circumstances under which Paul originally composed this epistle. My few points of departure from the consensus will become apparent as I go along.

During my years studying this epistle, I have found several commentaries to be very helpful and feel duty-bound to acknowledge these authors at those points where I have appropriated their thoughts and incorporated their arguments

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1. See Payne’s “Series Introduction,” p. xvi.

## FIRST CORINTHIANS

into my exposition. You will see in my footnotes throughout this volume names you may recognize: Leon Morris, Charles Hodge, and John Calvin. But I have also found several commentaries outside the Reformed tradition to be quite helpful as well. The names of C. K. Barrett, Richard Hays, and Gordon Fee will surface often. While I do not always agree with the latter group, they are quite helpful at points and their views are well-known and need to be addressed by anyone who seeks to preach through 1 Corinthians with its many controversies, and difficult points of application.

First Corinthians is a demanding letter because it addresses so many controversial doctrines and practices in the daily life of the church (such as church discipline and speaking in tongues). These issues were as difficult for the Corinthian church to grasp in Paul's day, as they are to apply in our own. So, we must plow ahead and preach the whole counsel of God, and at the same time trust that the same blessed Holy Spirit who breathed forth this letter when Paul initially composed it, will give us the grace to interpret it correctly, as well as the courage to proclaim it in all its power.

It is my prayer that you will find this effort helpful in helping you understand Paul's remarkable epistle. To that end I recall the anecdote once told me by one of my seminary professors. Seems that a famous New Testament scholar had finally completed the manuscript of his massive commentary on the Gospel of John. Seeking to share the benefits of his labors and get a bit of preliminary feedback about his work, the scholar asked one of the cleaning crew to take a mimeographed copy, read through it, and tell him what he thought. The scholar encountered the man a week or two later. The man looked sheepishly at the scholar and said, "Well, I tried to read through it and didn't get very far. Sorry, but I didn't understand very much of it. So, I decided to read through the Gospel of John, and after I

## *Preface*

did your book made a lot more sense.” If I have succeeded in any small way, then you will understand 1 Corinthians a bit better after reading this exposition than you did before.

Kim Riddlebarger  
January, 2013  
Anaheim, California

# Introduction

It has been said that the city of Corinth was the New York, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles of the Apostle Paul's day, all rolled into one.<sup>1</sup> The parallels between the culture and life of this ancient Greek city and modern America are so striking and obvious that a number of theologians have seen fit to make the comparison independently from one another. The church Paul helped to found in Corinth was largely Gentile in ethnicity, yet with a significant Jewish minority. The Gentiles in the Corinthian church were recent converts from Greco-Roman paganism. These new Christians found themselves struggling to learn the doctrines of the Christian faith and then live out their new faith in a city and culture well-known for its rampant sexual immorality and idolatry. To be a Christian in first-century Corinth was much like being a Christian in twenty-first century America. The similarities between the Corinth of Paul's day and America of ours is an important indication that there is much for us to learn from Paul's remarkable letter to the church in Corinth, known to us as 1 Corinthians.

Although Reformed Christians often pride themselves in being students of Paul—devoting themselves to the study of Paul's letters such as Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians—1 Corinthians is often overlooked despite the fact that many of the issues Paul addresses in this epistle are absolutely vital to the health of Christ's church.<sup>2</sup> In fact, many of the issues prompt-

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1. Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 3.

2. Indeed, there are very few "Reformed" commentaries on First Corinthians. There is Calvin's commentary, of course, and a solid (but now dated) ef-

## FIRST CORINTHIANS

ing Paul to write to the Corinthians are facing the church again today. The importance of 1 Corinthians becomes especially clear once we make the connection between the Greco-Roman paganism of first century Corinth and the religious climate of contemporary America.

Paul's two Corinthian letters are often overlooked in Reformed circles presumably because of Paul's discussion of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, tongues being one of them. But this is a letter we should not ignore—in our current historical context. In 1 Corinthians we find a number of important issues addressed by Paul:

- There is a fascinating discussion of the collision between Christianity and Greco-Roman paganism (specifically how Christians are to deal with idolatry).
- There are a number of ethical issues addressed (such as Christians suing each other in secular courts, and questions regarding pagan sexual mores and sexual immorality).
- Paul discusses at length the person and work of the Holy Spirit (in regeneration and the role of spiritual gifts).
- Paul describes Christian worship (in this letter we have a description of the way the Lord's Supper is administered, as well as a call for proper order in worship).
- Paul also discusses the doctrine of the church (the church as the body of Christ and temple of the Holy Spirit, the dangers of division within the church, and the need to exercise church discipline).

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fort from Charles Hodge. Leon Morris's volume in the Tyndale series is very solid and represents the best of evangelical Anglicanism. But First Corinthians is an epistle Reformed commentators have not often addressed.

## Introduction

- Paul's epistle ends with the most important discussion of the resurrection found anywhere in the New Testament.

As you can see, there is much here that is important to the life and health of our churches. Therefore, 1 Corinthians is supremely worthy of our time and attention.

Before we turn to the opening verses of this letter, I will strive to accomplish several things. First, we need to consider the history and background of the city of Corinth. Second, we will consider Paul's connection to the Corinthian church, and then address his reasons for composing this letter to those he knew so well, but who were struggling so mightily against the spirit of the age.

### The Corinth of Paul's Day

The city of Corinth was a prosperous commercial crossroad located on the Isthmus of Corinth (a narrow peninsula). The city stood on the main trading road between the two nearby port cities of Cenchreae (to the east) and Lechaeum (to the west), located on the Aegean and Ionian seas, respectively. Given the difficult nature of sailing along the southern coast of the Peloponnesian peninsula (especially during the winter months), much of the commerce between Italy and Asia went through Corinth, transiting across the isthmus on a paved road known as the *diolkos*. Ships would dock at either port, the cargo (or even the ship itself) would be carried across the peninsula to the other port. The ancient geographer Strabo pointed out that Corinth's strategic location made it the master of two harbors. The city dominated virtually all trade between Asia and Italy.

By Paul's time, Corinth was probably like other large commercial seaports of that era, filled with merchants, slaves, and laborers.<sup>3</sup> This trade generated great wealth, and made Corinth

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3. C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968), 1ff.

## FIRST CORINTHIANS

into a cultural and ethnic melting pot much like any large American urban area today. Given the content of Paul's two Corinthian letters, and the names mentioned in the chapters of Acts which deal with this period in the apostolic church's development, it appears that the majority of those in the church there were Gentiles. Most of the names are Latin and Greek, indicative of the fact that the area was under Roman law and ethos, although the city's Greek past was certainly still an inescapable portion of the cultural fabric of daily life.

Corinth was home to the Isthmian Games, an athletic event second only to the Olympics in importance, and dominated by celebrity athletes. Held every two years—even during the years the city sat in ruins—the Isthmian Games attracted huge crowds. In fact, the most important political office in the city was that of the sponsor of the games—a position much like that of commissioner of the International Olympic Committee today. The presence of the games made Corinth something of a popular “tourist destination.” As we will see, what happened in Corinth did not stay in Corinth.

Much of the city was destroyed by Roman armies in 146 BC, and many of its residents were killed or taken into slavery. Despite the city's strategic importance, the area lay in ruins until 44 BC, when Julius Caesar ordered a Roman colony built on the site. Many of the people living in Corinth when Paul established the church there were descendants of former slaves, Roman freedmen, laborers, or retired soldiers who remained in the area because of the thriving economy. Corinth was filled with “upwardly mobile” people, establishing another of the parallels between Corinth and the modern world.<sup>4</sup> The city was prosperous and self-sufficient, and Paul was there during a time of a great economic boom. This was an important and strategic

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4. Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians: Interpretation Bible Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 2ff.

## Introduction

place for Paul to plant a church, because it was an ideal location from which to evangelize the local population, as well as those many souls who passed through the area heading west to Italy or east into Asia.<sup>5</sup>

In pre-Roman days, Corinth had a notorious reputation for being a center of sexual promiscuity—much like Copenhagen, Amsterdam, and Bangkok have today. One Athenian playwright (Aristophanes) used the phrase *korinthiazesthai* as a synonym for fornication. To call a young lady a “Corinthian girl” was to imply she was promiscuous. The city was filled with prostitutes (many associated with temple worship), with perhaps as many as one thousand prostitutes associated with the temple of Aphrodite alone. Although this was the case before Corinth was destroyed by the Romans, the city had a long history of immorality which in Paul’s time was often most evident in the local guild hall (especially among the tradesmen). Because the trade guilds devoted themselves to various “gods” or “goddesses,” Corinth was dotted with pagan temples and statues dedicated to these “gods and goddesses.” A statue of Athena still dominated the marketplace when Paul was there. The connection between pagan religion and sexual immorality cannot be overlooked. Wherever paganism dominates, sexual immorality is openly accepted. This too is very much like modern America.

All of this is to say that those who were converted to Christianity came from this pagan background, and therefore required much instruction (catechesis) in the Christian faith. Christians in Corinth faced the difficult struggle to give up long-held pagan practices and traditions. As is evident throughout Paul’s letter, this was not an easy place to be a Christian.

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5. Anthony. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1ff.

## FIRST CORINTHIANS

### Date and General Contents

Paul's strong personal ties to the city figure prominently in this letter. According to Acts 18:1ff., Paul visited Corinth during his second missionary journey. By the time Paul arrived in Corinth, he was badly in need of a break. He had encountered fierce opposition from the Jews in nearby Philippi, and then again in Thessalonica and Berea. Paul also had a difficult time in Athens. So it is no wonder that early on in this letter Paul recalls that he first arrived in Corinth in weakness, fear, and trembling (1 Cor. 2:3). Because of the lack of persecution he experienced in Corinth (Acts 18:10), Paul was able to stay for some eighteen months (Acts 18:11). We also know from the Book of Acts that the Lord told Paul in a vision that he had many people in this city yet to come to faith (Acts 18:10). It is noteworthy that the doctrine of election became the basis for Paul's efforts to evangelize the city.

We can date Paul's stay in Corinth about AD 50–51. Paul probably left the city in the fall of AD 51, and upon the conclusion of his second missionary journey, returned again to Asia during his third journey in the fall of AD 52. According to Acts 19:10 and 20:31, Paul remained in Ephesus for nearly three years, from the fall of AD 52 until the spring of AD 55. It was while Paul was in Ephesus that he likely first wrote to the Corinthians (in response to questions they had put to him), since Paul speaks of the Corinthians misunderstanding a previous (and unknown) letter he had sent to them earlier (1 Cor. 5:9). Paul writes to clear up any misunderstandings, as well as address other issues which had come to his attention.

According to Leon Morris,

The immediate occasion of the Epistle was the letter Paul had received from the Corinthian church, for which a reply was necessary. But what mattered much more to Paul was clearly the news that had come to him independently of the letter [from

## Introduction

Chloe's family who were traveling through Ephesus]. There were disquieting irregularities in the conduct of the believers at Corinth. Paul was troubled by the "tendency on the part of some believers to make the break with pagan society as indefinite as possible . . . . The Church was in the world, as it had to be, but the world was in the Church, as it ought not to be." So much did this matter to Paul that he spends six chapters dealing with it before he so much as touched on the matters about which they had written him.<sup>6</sup>

As just noted, Paul mentions a letter he had written previously to the Corinth church which was badly misunderstood by the Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:9). In that letter he told them not to associate with immoral persons. The Corinthians mistakenly took this to mean *all* immoral persons, while Paul only meant immoral professing believers who behaved in a way that was inconsistent with their profession of faith in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 5:10–13). This misunderstanding needed to be cleared up—which Paul does in chapter 5.

Furthermore, while Paul was in Ephesus, he received disturbing news from certain members of Chloe's house—a family that Paul probably knew from his time in Corinth. Presumably, the report included other problems such as divisions and factions within the church (1:11), negative attitudes toward the apostles throughout the church (4:1–21), incestuous behavior (5:1–5), and lawsuits between Christians (6:1–11). Paul's response to these matters take up the first six chapters of this letter. Then in chapter 7, Paul writes "now concerning the matters about which you wrote," indicating that in the balance of this letter Paul was also responding to issues raised by the Corinthians in correspondence they had sent to the apostle. Apparently

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6. Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 25–26.

## FIRST CORINTHIANS

a delegation of believers including Stephanas, Fortunatas, and Achaicus (16:17), came to Paul in Ephesus with these questions in the form of a letter asking the apostle for a response.

While the first six chapters address the issues raised with Paul in Ephesus by Chloe's family, in chapters 7–15, Paul responds to the specific questions which had come to him in writing through the delegation just mentioned. The questions asked of Paul by the Corinthians in their letter deal, in part, with marriage and the status of those who are unmarried or widowed (7:1–40). Paul is also asked about eating food which had been used in idol sacrifices, and while warning the Corinthians about the incompatibility of Greco-Roman idolatry with their new-found faith in Jesus Christ, the apostle is forced to defend his apostolic authority (8:1–10:33). In 1 Corinthians 11:1–16, Paul takes up the matter of appropriate behavior and decorum during worship, before addressing the improper manner in which the Corinthians were celebrating the Lord's Supper (11:17–34).

The next series of questions put to Paul by the Corinthian believers concerns spiritual things, including spiritual gifts and the way the Holy Spirit distributes these gifts among the Corinthians (12:1–31). Paul points out that these gifts are given for the common good, and especially so that they might love one another (13:1–13). At this point, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the importance of building up one another and conducting worship decently and in good order and at this point addresses one of the most pressing matters of controversy raised by the Corinthians—speaking in tongues and how that particular spiritual gift is to be practiced in the churches (14:1–14).

In answering their final question to him, Paul addresses the resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as the bodily resurrection of believers at the end of age (15:1–58). The final chapter (16:1–24) contains information about Paul's future plans and he offers several bits of instruction as well as concluding exhortations. It

## *Introduction*

has been said, correctly so, that “no part of the Pauline corpus more clearly illustrates the character of Paul the man, Paul the Christian, Paul the pastor, and Paul the apostle” than does this epistle. In fact, Paul leaves us an “invitation to imitate him, and thereby imitate Christ (1 Cor. 11:1).”<sup>7</sup>

So, with this historical background in mind, we now turn to the opening section (verses 1–3) of this remarkable letter which we now know simply as “First Corinthians.”

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7. D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 285



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# First Corinthians

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# Greetings from Paul

## 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1 3

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*Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

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Those who know the letters of Paul find a familiar introduction to 1 Corinthians. “Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes.” Paul’s opening greeting is typical of a first-century epistle and includes the name of the sender (Paul), and his co-sender, Sosthenes, who may be the synagogue ruler mentioned in Acts 18:17, who was beaten by a mob.<sup>1</sup> After introducing himself to his readers—many of whom already knew Paul personally because he had been in their midst for eighteen months—he adds the important qualification that he was called to be an apostle by the will of God. We know from Paul’s comments in Galatians 1:16 (“God was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I

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1. Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, Hermenia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976), 19; Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 30.

## FIRST CORINTHIANS

might preach him among the Gentiles”), that his particular calling took the form of his office as apostle to the Gentiles. Corinth was a Gentile city with a significant Jewish presence, so Paul’s role in Corinth fits naturally with his office, background, and abilities.<sup>2</sup>

Paul introduces himself to the Corinthians as an apostle, because in this epistle he will be speaking with the full apostolic authority of his office in order to both rebuke and instruct the Corinthian congregation in those areas in which they are struggling. The man writing is not just Paul, their friend and acquaintance. The man writing is also Paul the apostle, who addresses them with the full divine authority associated with his office. Paul was not an apostle by his own choice—“I think I’ll become an apostle.” As recounted in Acts 9:1–31, Paul’s apostolic office is one to which he has been called by the will of God and the direct intervention of the Lord of the church, Jesus Christ. The risen Christ appeared to Paul as the young Pharisee was making his way to Damascus to hunt down and arrest Christians in that city. It was Jesus who personally commissioned Paul for his apostolic office.

One of the reasons Paul gives for composing and sending this epistle is to correct the misunderstanding in this church of what the office of apostle actually involves (1 Cor. 4:1–21; 1 Cor. 9:1–23). Since Paul writes with the authority of an apostle, he speaks directly to those who have no such authority, who have impressed the Corinthians with their charm and gifts, but who have not been called by God in any sense to their self-appointed “ministries.”<sup>3</sup> Paul has the apostolic pedigree these other teachers do not have. He has seen the risen Christ. Even though Paul

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2. Philo mentions that Corinth was home to a substantial Jewish settlement (Philonis Alexandrini, *Legatio ad Gaium*, paras. 281–282), and Paul will list Jews among the categories he uses to enumerate members of the church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13).

3. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 31.

## Greetings from Paul

originally came to Corinth in fear and trembling, without personal charisma or eloquent speech, the Corinthians must listen to him. Why? Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church says the Corinthians must listen to him. Paul is an apostle. He speaks with the authority of Jesus Christ.

### The Church in Corinth

This letter is addressed to the church (*ekklesia*) of Corinth. “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus” (v. 2). Paul uses the term *ekklesia* twenty-two times in this letter. The word refers to the “assembly” (which not only means “called out from the nations” as often understood), but especially emphasizes that group of Christian believers who assemble together for public worship, presumably to hear Paul’s letter read aloud.<sup>4</sup> The word *ekklesia* can be used of any large secular assembly, such as that described in Acts 19:32, 41, during the rioting in Ephesus when a mob assembled bent on doing harm to the apostle Paul. But the term as used throughout the New Testament has acquired a distinctly Christian meaning. Christians were careful not to take over secular words used to refer to guilds or religious groups. They took the term *ekklesia* because it was the term used throughout the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) for the people of Israel. These early Christians saw the church as the New Israel. They were no ordinary public assembly. The church is the *ekklesia* of God.<sup>5</sup> It is this particular assembly of people of whom Paul says are “those sanctified in Christ Jesus.”

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4. Cf. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 32. See the discussion of this in: Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 555ff.

5. Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 35. According to Morris, “Christians bypassed the regular [Greek] words for religious brotherhoods, and made [ekklesia] their usual self-designation. They were probably influenced by the fact that it is used in the LXX of the people of Israel. This usage reflects their deep conviction that the church is not merely one religious group among many. It is

## FIRST CORINTHIANS

In fact, Paul speaks of his hearers as those “called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (v. 3). Why is it that Paul emphasizes sanctification and the fact that believers in this church are called unto holiness, rather than emphasize justification as in his epistles to the churches in Galatia or Rome? The term used here (sanctified), is a perfect passive participle, which means that every believer is already reckoned as sanctified, even though many of those in this church were still engaging in sinful and unacceptable behavior typical of paganism. John Calvin contends that Paul is pointing out that because God has begun his work in the Corinthians, he then brings it to completion by degrees.<sup>6</sup> Because the merits of Jesus Christ have been reckoned to God’s people through faith (cf. Rom 5:12–18; Phil. 3:7–9), God sees the righteousness of his son, and not the imperfections of the Corinthians. Yet, the grace of God motivates the Corinthians on to obedience.

### Called to Be Holy

All believers are called to be “holy” (or saints). In one sense, a complete and “definitive” sanctification occurs by virtue of every believer’s union with Christ through faith. All those in Christ are “sanctified” and “holy” by virtue of the fact that Christ’s righteousness has already been imputed to them through faith. This latter term, “holy” (*hagioi*), does not apply to certain holy individuals who attain a higher level of personal holiness than others. Instead, it applies to all the members of this church who are set apart by God for his service, just as Israel’s priests and vessels had been set aside or “sanctified” for the service of God in the temple.<sup>7</sup> Paul

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unique. Ordinary religious words will not do. And it is not any ‘assembly’: it is the *ekklesia* of God.”

6. John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, CTNC, trans. John W. Frasier (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 19.

7. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 16.

## Greetings from Paul

speaks of all believers as “holy” in this sense. He will also speak of believers as being set apart and endowed with spiritual gifts for service in the true temple, which is the mystical body of Jesus Christ in which all believers are living stones.

What does such holiness actually entail in light of the fact that all those called by God were sinners when they were called (cf. 1 Cor. 6:11)? As Paul reminds them, the Corinthian Christians had been called by God through the preaching of the gospel, and then responded to that gospel in faith. Therefore, they are set apart by God for God’s own purposes. God’s calling has a goal or a *telos*—holiness. Because the Corinthians have been called by God through the preaching of the gospel to faith in Jesus Christ, their lives should manifest this holiness which flows out of their faith in Christ. The Corinthians cannot live like godless Gentiles any longer. Definitive sanctification (and justification) will manifest itself in “progressive sanctification.” Those set apart by God (in definitive sanctification), will demonstrate growth in holiness (progressive sanctification), and in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus. As Michael Horton puts it, “We *are* holy (definitive sanctification), therefore, we are *to be* holy (progressive sanctification). Although we are not saved *by works*, we are saved *for works*.”<sup>8</sup>

The reason Paul emphasizes these particular points in his opening greeting probably has to do with the specific issues facing this congregation. The Corinthians have been called out from paganism and are set apart by God. Their calling is unto holiness. Elsewhere Paul explains that God’s Son “gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and *to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works*” (Titus 2:14; emphasis added). But the Corinthian church’s conduct as reported to Paul by Chloe’s family indicates that their behavior

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8. Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 653.

## FIRST CORINTHIANS

is anything but “holy.” So, Paul begins by reminding his hearers of what they should know to be true. Their calling in Christ is unto holiness, not the kind of sinful behavior which had been reported to Paul. Justification must manifest itself in sanctification. All those who trust in Christ and are reckoned as righteous are also to live in holiness.

When Paul speaks of this congregation as those “called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (v. 3b), he is reminding us that the calling together of the assembly at Corinth is not unique. All Christians who call upon the name of Jesus Christ are united to their living head through faith, and are also sanctified in Christ and called to be holy. In this we see the church as the New Israel. In the Book of Deuteronomy (e.g., Deut. 12:8–21) the Israelites were to collectively call upon God’s name from one particular place (Jerusalem). With the coming of Jesus Christ and the spread of his kingdom to the ends of the earth, no longer must the people of God go to a certain “holy” place to call upon the Lord. Christians are to call upon the Lord wherever they happen to be, even if that is in a prominently pagan place such as Corinth.<sup>9</sup>

Paul is not in any sense holding the Corinthians to a different or unfair standard. Nor can the conduct in the Corinthian church be seen in total isolation from the other churches. Some of this conduct was so offensive that it came to Paul by word of mouth. If Christians of the first century are like Christians today (and there is no reason to assume otherwise), then we can assume that other Christians in other cities knew all about the things going on in Corinth. If the Corinthians are not living up to their calling in Christ, they will suffer not only the temporal consequences of their actions, they risk the direct judgment

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9. G. K. Beale, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 696.

## Greetings from Paul

of God. Given the organic nature of the church as the body of Christ, if the Corinthians suffer, all the churches will suffer.

### The Marks of the Church

One other point which ought to be raised here has to do with the concept of the “marks” of a true church as stated in the Reformed confessions. The three marks of a true church include the pure preaching of the gospel, the proper administration of the sacraments, and church discipline.<sup>10</sup> Based upon what we know was going on in Corinth, the Corinthian congregation was undisciplined and struggling with the proper administration of the sacraments. And yet, Paul still refers to this congregation as “the church.” Some have deduced from this that the church in Corinth was still a true church, but would cease to be one if there was no repentance after Paul’s instructions arrive in the form of his two Corinthian letters. Others have concluded that if such a congregation was still considered a church by the apostle, then discipline cannot be a mark of the *essence* of a true church, even though church discipline is necessary for the well-being of the church.<sup>11</sup> In either case, church discipline was lacking, and Paul writes, in part, to correct this serious problem.

### Grace and Peace

In verse 3, we find the familiar apostolic greeting: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” While we quickly read over these greetings without giving them much consideration, it is important to reflect upon the contents we find in them. Grace (*charis*) is a reference to God’s free gift to us of our salvation in Christ. As Charles Hodge puts it, “Grace is favor and peace its fruits.”<sup>12</sup> While peace comes from the He-

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10. Cf. *Belgic Confession*, Art. 29.

11. See, for example: Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 576–578.

12. Charles Hodge, *I & II Corinthians*, reprint ed., (Carlisle, PA: Banner of

## FIRST CORINTHIANS

brew greeting *shalom*, it not only refers to the peace the believer has with God through the cross of Jesus Christ (i.e., the war between God and the sinner is over), but also includes the blessing of spiritual prosperity. When these words are pronounced in Christian worship, God is greeting us, extending to us his grace in Jesus Christ, as well as declaring all of the covenantal blessings of his *shalom*. Christians have used these words to open worship since the apostolic age.

In many ways, the religious and cultural climate of America and the Western world is very much like that of first century Corinth. As with the church there, God has called many of our contemporaries to faith in Christ from the pagan culture in which we live, and all of us find ourselves living in a time and place dominated by pagan ways of thinking and doing, along with all the things that go with such a perspective. From our highly sexualized pop culture, to our culture's increasing openness to all forms of paganism (things like interest in paranormal activity, vampires and witchcraft, eastern religions, and the corresponding emphasis upon spirituality, meditation, etc.), to the skepticism of the age (no one dare make a public truth claim about religion, since religion is just a matter of faith and utterly subjective), it is all too apparent that the intellectual climate of the modern world is just like that of ancient Corinth. This is why knowing the contents of this letter, reading it often, and studying it carefully, is so important to the health of Christ's church.

As the people of Israel were to assemble together in Jerusalem to call upon the name of YHWH, so too the people of God in the new covenant era assemble together on the Lord's Day wherever they happen to be. A group of new Christians assembled together in Corinth in the first century, and despite all their sins and troubles, they were still God's people, sanctified and set apart for God's purposes—just as Christians are today. Because

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Truth Trust, 1988), 5.

## Greetings from Paul

of the organic nature of the church as the body of Christ (the so-called “communion of the saints”), we join those in every place and across the ages, as “those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” In a church like that in Corinth struggling with division and schism, calling upon the Lord together was not only a wonderful cure in such a situation, but Paul’s exhortation should remind each of us that we are part of a universal church with boundaries set far beyond our own congregations and denominations. There are brothers and sisters around the world who join us on the Lord’s Day in calling upon our Lord. It is a joy, comfort, and an encouragement to think of unseen and unknown brothers and sisters across the globe who join with us as we worship in our local congregations on Sunday. They too are calling upon our Lord Jesus.

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