
LISTENING TO 1 & 2 CORINTHIANS

Who's Writing? The apostle Paul. Paul planted the church in Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18). There he teamed up with Priscilla and Aquila in making tents and in bringing the gospel to the Jewish synagogue. When things in the synagogue got ugly, Paul moved next store to a house of a local Corinthian (Titius Justus). Eventually the synagogue ruler and a number of non-Jews also came to embrace the gospel. God then appeared to Paul in a dream assuring Him that many more would come to believe the gospel and join the church. True to God's promise, Paul had a fruitful ministry in Corinth that lasted 18 months. Paul had a very close and personal relationship with the church at Corinth. He was in regular contact with the church through his ministry team, through his letters and during a few short follow up visits. 1 Corinthians was probably written 2-3 years after Paul started the church while 2 Corinthians was written a year or two later. 1 & 2 Corinthians are unique in providing us with a picture Paul's ongoing gospel ministry as he encouraged, taught & corrected them to conform their individual and corporate lives to the gospel and not the surrounding culture.

Who's listening? Corinth was one of the major commercial and cultural centers in the ancient Greco-Roman world. As a city built on a strategic Isthmus in the Mediterranean Sea, it was a natural bridge for the exchange of goods and the interaction of cultures. It was most likely the wealthiest city in Greece. Every 2 years they hosted the Isthmian games – a sporting event only 2nd to the Olympics. Corinth was also a leader in the entertainment industry - they had an 18,000 seat theater and a 3000 seat concert hall. As far as religion, Corinth had temples dedicated to Aphrodite (goddess of love), Isis (Egyptian goddess of seafarers), Asclepius (Greek god of healing) and more. Corinth also developed a reputation for sexual immorality and vice. One ancient writer coined the term to “Corinthianize” to describe engaging in immoral behavior.

Money, success, sports, comfort, entertainment, sex and sensuality - one scholar says, “It was New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas” rolled into one. Here in this cosmopolitan city, a church was born. This group of Christ followers struggled letting go of deeply embedded cultural patterns and pursuing a new gospel rooted way of life.

How to Listen to... An Epistle

- Pay attention to words, sentences and paragraphs BUT don't lose sight of the message of the whole letter. Always interpret smaller sections (verses) in light of the overall purpose and theme of the letter.
- The NT Letters were a carefully crafted and costly means of communicating important messages to churches/individuals.
- Enter into the situation of the original readers & pay attention to cultural context.
- Be mindful of cultural adjustments in application.
- Read imperatives in light of indicatives; Gospel responses in light of Gospel realities.
- Don't get discouraged by not understanding words or all the steps in the arguments. Often Paul uses theological shorthand that becomes clearer as we continue to soak in his writings.

Where 1 Corinthians fits in the Big Story

How to live in the already and not yet. Every NT Epistle addresses the “already and not yet tension” of the gospel. If Romans provides us with a careful theology of the ‘already and not yet’, 1 Corinthians shows us how this theology is applied when we swing the pendulum too far to the “already” and forget the “not yet”. The Christians in Corinth downplayed & ignored the reality of their continued sin and need for radical gospel change. As one scholar said they played down the “challenge of the gospel and over-emphasized its comfort”.

Church in Culture. Give the description of Corinthian culture above, it is not hard to imagine that this church of new followers of Jesus has difficulty navigating how to live out their newfound faith and its surrounding culture. 1 Corinthians provides us with model of how Paul addressed the question of how the new community of Jesus (the church) should relate the culture. How does the gospel create a new and distinct counter-culture? How does the call to be holy impact our participation in the culture and our relationships to those who don't Jesus? How should the church teach, exhort and rebuke those who claim to follow Jesus but whose lives conform more to the culture than to Christ? What is the relationship between gospel ethics (becoming more like Jesus) and gospel mission (inviting others to come to know Jesus)?

Resurrection Theology. 1 Corinthians 15 is the theological capstone to all of the issues & questions Paul addresses in the letter. In order to turn away from a prideful self-focused life to pursue a life of sacrificial service and mission (love), we need to be rooted in the theology of resurrection (hope). 1 Cor. 15 provides us with the longest theological explanation of resurrection in the NT.

1 Corinthians Big Theme: Authentic spirituality: The journey of true spiritual formation is a process of being cured of our prideful selfishness & complacency and learning to live in cruciform love in the church for the world.

Outline of 1 Corinthians

Part One – Paul's Response to the Corinthians Issues (1:1-6:20)

- A. The Issue of Divisions in the Church (1:10-4:21)
 - a. Cruciform Wisdom (1-3:4)
 - b. Cruciform Ministry (3:5-4)
- B. The Issue of Sex Part 1 (Ch. 5)
- C. The Issue of Disputes in the Church (6:1-11)
- D. The Issue of Sex Part 2 (6:12-20)

Part Two – Paul's Response to the Corinthians Questions (7:1-14:40)

- A. What about Marriage? (7)
- B. What about Food and Idols (8-11)
- C. What about Worship? (12-14)

Part Three – Paul's Resurrection Theology (15-16)

- A. First importance - Cross & Resurrection (15)
- B. Conclusion (16)

What to listen for in 1 Corinthians:

- Listen for how the many faces of pride, arrogance and boasting show up in your life.
- Listen for how easy it for us to be self-deceived & complacent individually and corporately about how we are doing in the journey of becoming more like Jesus.
- Listen for how cruciform love & wisdom should shape all our thinking, decisions & living & for how cures us of self-absorbed spirituality.
- Listen for how we are to live in and engage a culture of comfort, pleasure and celebrity. Listen for the relationship between holiness of the church and the mission of the church.
- Listen for how the journey of growth in Jesus is marathon journey not a sprint (esp. 1 Cor. 9:24-10:13).
- Listen for the danger and destructive effects of divisions in the church. Listen for areas of pride in your life that lead you to divide people into categories.
- Listen for how a theology of the bodily resurrection is essential for faithfully following Jesus. (Ch. 15)
- Listen for the guidelines for worship and the use of gifts.
- 3 Helpful questions - How can I glorify God, build up believers and show the world the gospel? (10:31-33) (vs. "my right to do what I want"="All things are lawful for me").

Where 2 Corinthians fits in the Big Story

Early Threats to the Gospel - In 1 Corinthians we see Paul pastorally guiding the Corinthians away from their culturally accommodated way of life. In 2 Corinthians we find Paul pastorally pleading with the church not to follow the wrong leaders away from the gospel altogether. As Scott Hafeman says, in 2 Cor. "Paul strengthens the repentant majority, while at the same time seeking to win back the resistant minority". One of the greatest challenges facing the leaders of the early church was how to graciously guard the new churches from false teaching and false leaders. 2 Corinthians is probably the best example of how Paul handled this challenge in a gospel-centered approach.

Cruciform Leadership. As far as we know Paul wrote to and visited the Corinthian church more than any other church he planted. He cared for them like a spiritual father (1 Cor. 4:15). 2 Corinthians, perhaps more than any other letter, gives us insight into Paul, the pastor. In the letter he develops how the cross and resurrection is the only paradigm for faithful ministry and leadership.

2 Corinthians Big Theme: The key to authentic spiritual leadership is learning that God works through us to display His glory in the gospel in our weakness, need and sufferings.

Outline of 2 Corinthians

Part One – The Confidence of Spiritual Leadership: God not ourselves (1-7:1)

- A. Comfort in Affliction (1:3-11)
- B. Change of Plans not of Character (1:12-2:4)
- C. Conflict Resolved (2:5-11)
- D. Confidence – God always leads (2:12-3:3)
- E. Confidence – Glory of the gospel not the leader (3:4-4:6)
- F. Clay Jars – Trust in eternal unseen not the fading seen (**4:7**-5:10)
- G. Call to choose to follow Cruciform leaders (5:11-6:13)

Part Two – The Collection (8-9)

- A. The call to give – The gospel grace of giving
- B. The reason to give – The cycle of grace and thanks

Part Three – Suffering leaders vs. Super leaders (10-13)

- A. Boldness in leadership – God not self-centered (10)
- B. Boasting in leadership - weakness (11-12:13)
- C. Conclusion: Paul's third visit (13)

What to listen for in 2 Corinthians:

- Listen for how the pillars of Corinthian culture influenced them more than the gospel: 1) self-sufficient individualism 2) wealth as the road to social status 3) fame and reputation based on accomplishments & possessions 4) boasting as an acceptable way to achieve honor 5) see where you live as proof of your social position
- Listen for the true credentials & confidence of spiritual leaders – deep experience & trust in the power of the gospel learned in trials & suffering. (Ch. 11)
- Listen for the gospel to challenge you as to where you find your affirmation and approval.
- Listen for how you may be tempted to judge the spiritual influence of a person/church based on numbers, activity & outward metrics.
- Listen for what it means to "boast" in weakness & for how God's grace is sufficient.
- Listen for who God is called calling you to lead - Don't worry about the right technique, the right program or about our performance
- Listen for why we are called to be generous & sacrificial in our giving.
- "Writing 2 Cor. must have come near to breaking Paul, and... a church that is prepared to read it with him, and understand it, may find itself broken too" (CK Barrett).