THE CORNERSTONE
OF OUR FAITH

Ancient Issues for Contemporary Times
Studies in 1 and 2 Corinthians
by Michael Brown

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# table of contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>About the Author</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Corinthian Letters</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Approaching the Scriptures</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>A Church Divided?</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Immorality In the Church</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Issues In Christian Marriage</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Christians and Divorce</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The Single Life</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Issues With Christian Worship</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Unequally Yoked</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Gender Issues in the Church</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>The Matter of Money</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>The Matter of the Lord’s Supper</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Eternity-Focused Living</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Michael Brown serves as the Senior Evangelist for the Westview church of Christ in Huntsville, AL. He is a native of Trenton, NJ and has served the church in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Tennessee, and Alabama. He has authored several books, including three in *The Cornerstone of Our Faith* series.

Brother Brown holds a Master of Religion degree and a Master of Divinity degree from Lipscomb University as well as a Doctorate from Harding School of Theology. He serves as a Senior Software Consultant for Marshall Space Flight Center (NASA) in Huntsville.
The aim of this study is to examine common issues found in the Corinthian letters and in our modern day. Our study is thematic as opposed to a comprehensive study of the Corinthian letters. We are pinpointing common themes that continue to challenge Christians today.

Upon completion of this study series, you will have gained a clearer picture of life challenges for our ancient counterparts. You will also gain tremendous insight on how to apply God’s eternal principles to contemporary challenges.
Paul’s letters to the ancient Corinthian saints provide great insight into the world of the first-century church. These letters paint the picture of Christians in conflict with popular culture. The struggles were exacerbated by the fact that these were largely first-century Gentile converts. Still, Paul sought to call them to a realization of who they were in Christ and the implications this identity had for daily living.

The struggles with popular culture experienced by these early saints are quite akin to Christians in contemporary times. Though we live in a new era, and the world continues to change, there are some common threads that span the distance from ancient Corinth to contemporary America.

I hope this series of studies will allow you to see the challenges faced by fellow saints of a different era. As we examine Paul’s instructions to these Christians, may we also find a relevant word from our eternal God for the ever-changing times in which we live.
The Corinthian letters provide tremendous insight into the inner workings of the early church in a Gentile society. The saving message of Jesus came first to the Jews—the ancient covenant people of God. This gospel was then proclaimed among the Gentiles—a people with no covenant history with the God of heaven. Though the former group had knowledge of God’s holiness and His call for a holy people, the latter would need intense instruction on living as people of God. As we study the Corinthian letters, we need to keep this in mind. It will help us to think more soberly about aberrant behavior among God’s people today.

Paul’s history in Corinth began with his second missionary journey. He had departed from Athens and headed for Corinth. In Corinth, Paul met Aquila and Priscilla. The three shared a common trade and formed a close bond. It is most likely that Aquila and Priscilla were not Christians when Paul met them. Though he was from Pontus—a city with residents present during Pentecost (Acts 2:9)—Luke provides no word indicating that Aquila was converted prior to meeting Paul. The conversion of his fellow tradesman, the household of Crispus, and other believers of the message were the beginnings of the church in Corinth (Acts 18:5-8). The Lord
empowered and encouraged Paul to continue his efforts in the area. Paul remained in Corinth for a year and a half.

**Key Concepts**

Corinth, a seaport town with a reputation for wealth and debauchery, rested on an isthmus connecting the southern part of Greece with the rest of the country. Previously conquered and ravished during Rome’s conquest of Greece, the city had been rebuilt in 46 BC. When Paul arrived (approximately 50 AD), Corinth was a prosperous Romanized city with a population of 600,000 to 700,000 people—most of whom were slaves. The city was home to the isthmian games—a biannual event much like our Olympics. Paul wrote as many as four letters to the Corinthians. We have two of these letters in the canon of Scripture. First Corinthians finds Paul responding to reports he received from Chloe’s house concerning the Corinthian church. It also addresses questions that the Corinthians had for the apostle. In Second Corinthians, the central focus is Paul’s defense of his apostleship—something that was under attack among some in the church.

The church in Corinth was really a collection of household churches. Unlike contemporary times, the ancient church consisted of groups of Christians meeting in the homes of certain members. Most of these facilities could only accommodate about 50 people. Church buildings as we know them were unknown to the early saints.

**Looking Inside the Corinthian Letters**

There is always a significant degree of difficulty in reconstructing ancient events, and Paul’s history with the Corinthian church is no exception. Still, there are clear indicators in Scripture and other sources to help us paint a clearer picture.

Paul left the Corinthians after laboring in the area for
approximately eighteen months. His next area for extended ministry was in Ephesus, where he would labor for three years. During his work in Ephesus, he received word of immoral behavior among the Corinthian saints. Such conditions provoked the apostle to write them concerning this matter. This is the “previous letter” of Paul to the church (1 Corinthians 5:11). It was also at this time that Paul sent Titus to Corinth for the purpose of instructing and preparing them to participate in the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:6).

Paul received word that the Corinthians misunderstood the instruction in his previous letter. Some took him to teach isolation from all immoral people (1 Corinthians 5:9-13). First Corinthians is, in part, a response to the misunderstanding the Corinthian saints had over Paul’s previous instruction. It also addresses additional problems reported to Paul (1 Corinthians 1:11). Such issues included continued acts of immorality, litigation among Christians, celibacy and marital matters, wrong attitudes about spiritual gifts, abuses of the Lord’s Supper, and questions about the resurrection. The situation with the church had deteriorated, and Paul sent Timothy there to assess the situation (1 Corinthians 16:10-11).

Timothy’s report described a dire set of circumstances. A series of problems, including a growing anti-Paul sentiment, had developed among the Corinthians. There were a number of factors at work. The core factor was a growing misunderstanding among the Corinthians over what it meant to be “spiritual.” Their Hellenistic background and culture moved them to equate spirituality with human wisdom, a “higher knowledge,” and intellectual pride. Some had come to understand their experience with spiritual gifts as a sign of a higher level of spirituality. There was also a segment of the church community that considered themselves to have already attained an “other world” status i.e., they were already sharing in the benefits of resurrection life.
The results of such thinking were disastrous. There was the problem of a dualistic view of life. Some believed that what you did with your body had no impact on your spiritual life. There was the problem of a growing elitism as seen in competition for spiritual gifts. There was the matter of Paul’s worthiness as an apostle. His message, delivery, and manner did not fit that of the rhetoricians so commonly revered in that day. *Rhetoric* is basically the masterful use of language. Paul was so unlike Apollos who had visited Corinth shortly after Paul’s departure and had unwittingly enamored them with his speaking ability. He was also no Peter—who unlike Paul—had been with Jesus during the Lord’s earthly ministry. These issues spawned a series of others, all of which provided fertile ground for the total collapse of the church in Corinth. This report from Timothy moved Paul to make an emergency visit to Corinth—a visit which proved quite painful (2 Corinthians 2:1-2).

The painful visit Paul experienced with the Corinthians left him agitated in spirit. He not only faced growing rejection from the church in general, but he also experienced denunciation from a particular opponent. After leaving the city, he composed a severe letter and sent it to them by Titus. This letter has not been preserved for us. Though the letter was severe, he wrote it tearfully. He hoped to win them back to Christ and to himself.

Our gracious God worked mightily among the Corinthians. After some anxious months of waiting, Paul finally received word from Titus that the majority of the church had turned its heart back to the apostle. Paul’s direct antagonist had been disciplined, and the church was largely moving in the right direction (2 Corinthians 7:7-16). However, some problems still existed. Some had considered Paul’s changes in plans to visit Corinth as a sign of weakness (2 Corinthians 1:12-17). The Corinthians had failed to fulfill their promised contribution for the poor saints in Jerusalem—probably out
of the issues they had experienced with Paul (2 Corinthians 8:6-15). Some questioned the real reason behind Paul’s refusal to accept money from the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 9:1-23). These were used to a system of “patronage” in which visiting rhetoricians would receive money and recognition from citizens of rank and status. Such financial exchange could render the visiting speaker obligated to his benefactors. Paul would not allow himself to be caught up in such a system in which the gospel could be compromised.

Besides these things, a major problem had newly developed. False apostles had invaded the church and had taken aim at Paul’s apostleship. These were Jewish Christians bent on destroying Paul’s credibility. They took advantage of every avenue available to cause the Corinthians to reject Paul and his apostleship.

It would take tenacious faith to endure all that Paul faced among the saints in Corinth. He wrote of his sufferings as his share in the sufferings of Christ. He pleaded with the Corinthians to see things from the Lord’s perspective. He ardently defended his apostleship as particularly seen in 2 Corinthians. Through much toil and tears, Paul worked to bring the people to spiritual maturity in union with their Lord.

Paul’s work with this church provides us with warning and hope. Despite the cancer of worldliness that took hold of these saints, the love of God constrained Paul to patiently call them back to the Christ. This call is timeless—for Corinth is a microcosm of the modern-day church. Thanks be to God that His love moves Him to call us back to Him from every ill and for every age.

Paul’s ministry among the Corinthians shows the breadth and depth of love and responsibility to which would-be church leaders aspire. It is never easy to seek to stand in the gap and lead God’s people into
Christian maturity. Often, leadership is viewed from carnal eyes, but Paul’s ministry demonstrates what it truly means to shepherd God’s flock.

The road to Christian maturity is fraught with challenges. Each Christian comes to the Lord as damaged goods. The gracious God takes us where He finds us, forgives our past sins, declares us righteous, redeems us, gives us the Holy Spirit to indwell us, and then leads us into the experiential reality of sanctification. Studies in Corinthians show us the bumpy ride along the path to that reality.

It can become easy to think of the Scriptures as somewhat irrelevant to our contemporary world. The reality is that nothing could be further from the truth. The Scriptures are an eternal word for changing times. Through them, God provides a relevant word for every generation. There really is nothing new under the sun. Sin has its many nuances, but despite such distinctions by era, it is still sin. The gospel is the power of salvation to believers of any era.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the definition of culture?
2. Why is culture often so challenging to our faithfulness to God?
3. What is the definition of Gentile?
4. What is a scriptural understanding of being “spiritual”?
5. What complaint did some of the Corinthians have against Paul as a speaker?
6. What was the patronage system?
7. Why did the collection for the saints become problematic in Corinth?
8. What are some similarities between church issues in Corinth and those of today?
9. What lessons should church leaders learn from Paul’s work with the Corinthians?
10. What is meant by the reality of sanctification?

Just for Further Thought
1. Discuss what a spiritually mature Christian looks like.
2. Discuss how church leaders can help members become spiritually mature.