

# ***The Epistles of Paul***

## ***Week 2: I Corinthians***

### **Purpose:**

In week one of this series, we will be looking at the church in Corinth (for the first of two occurrences). This church started by Paul in the early 50s CE, was a complicated mix of Gentiles, Jews, Greeks, and Romans. This led to interesting theological disputes and debates, which led to significant correspondence to the church in Corinth following Paul's departure. The Church in Corinth is often a good glimpse within both the early church and the continued difficulties even modern churches face.

1. Have you ever read I Corinthians before? Have you studied it?
2. What differences do you already notice between I Thess. and I Corinthians?
3. How does a highly diverse community change how we talk about church and God?

### **Key Verse of the Week, I Cor 3:21-23**

*<sup>21</sup>So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, <sup>22</sup>whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, <sup>23</sup>and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.*

### **Opening Prayer:**

*Blessed Lord, as we continue to study your word and delve into the life of Paul, open the experiences and discussions of the church at Corinth to us. Help us to glimpse behind the curtain, seeing where your Spirit was moving and how we can follow you more fully. May the lessons of this epistle lead us in your path. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.*

### **Introduction and Background:**

The first epistle to the church in Corinth is a bit of a misnomer. Most scholars believe that this letter is an amalgamation of several letters written to the church over a few years. Put together as an anthology of sorts, this epistle would have served to both teach and remind the church of how they were supposed to be. Some of these early debates included Jewish practices, dietary laws, sacrifices to idols, role of women, communion, and calling each other followers of various disciples. Paul sought to put these issues to rest quickly, before they became larger issues.

The various parts of this epistle were likely written between 53 and 54 CE, maybe a year or so after Paul departed Corinth for Ephesus. Paul remained in close contact with the people in the community, receiving reports from Chloe and Staphaneus. Most concerning in these reports was the practicing of the Lord's Supper. Rather than sharing from a common table, persons were arranging themselves by their wealth. Persons of means had great feasts while others had barely anything. Paul quickly stops this practice and chastises the community for not caring for all in their midst.

The letter concludes with a revised view of the return of Christ, with Paul now telling the people (some 5-7 years after Thessalonica) that they should go ahead with their lives, not lingering on Jesus' return too much. This is a reaction to the changing understanding of Jesus' return being something immediate to something yet to come.

1. Why is it easy to fall into habits of classism and elitism, even within the church?
2. Why do you think the community held on to Paul's letters? How would they help?
3. Considering the difficulties faced by the early church, how do some of our own difficulties today underscore the need for prayer, worship, and study?

## **Today's Focus Passage, I Corinthians 3:1-23**

...I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup>I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, <sup>3</sup>for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? <sup>4</sup>For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human? <sup>5</sup>What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. <sup>6</sup>I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. <sup>7</sup>So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. <sup>8</sup>The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. <sup>9</sup>For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building. <sup>10</sup>According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. <sup>11</sup>For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup>Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— <sup>13</sup>the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. <sup>14</sup>If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. <sup>15</sup>If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire. <sup>16</sup>Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? <sup>17</sup>If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. <sup>18</sup>Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. <sup>19</sup>For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," <sup>20</sup>and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." <sup>21</sup>So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, <sup>22</sup>whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, <sup>23</sup>and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

1. What is the main point of this passage?
2. When one is tied to a leader, rather than to Jesus, what are some potential pitfalls?
3. What does it mean to "belong to Christ" as Paul believes?

### **Discussion:**

In our main passage today, Paul dives into an ongoing dispute regarding who follows which disciple. While we may often say "I went to 'x' school" or "I was a student of 'x'", the early Christians were placing their own faith in who they had learned from. They had even developed a hierarchy of who was important to learn from. Upon learning this, Paul challenges the community and their elitism. Rather than pointing to a practical issue, Paul calls upon a theological one: we are all under Christ Jesus. The particulars of which disciple you learned from is not as important as the fact you are following Christ. While this is obvious now, for the early church, clearing up that you did not have to learn from one of the earliest disciples was a profound and important step.

1. Who helped shape your faith? Who was your spiritual mentor?
2. Why do we as humans quickly start building barriers? How can we avoid this?
3. How does their situation connect to the church today?

### **Conclusion:**

Who do you follow? A preacher? A teacher? A church? For Paul the answer was clear: no, we follow Christ alone. The church in Corinth was imperfect and flawed, and in those flaws, Paul continued to teach them. We too are flawed. In those flaws the Spirit continues to open new doors and point out things we may have looked past or missed. The message of the Church in Corinth is that we must follow Christ in all that we do. We belong to Christ, not anyone else. In that, we find the promises of God.

*Close in prayer*