

TFTD C1 How to be a church: Introducing 1 Corinthians

If I speak with the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Spotted the quote? 1 Corinthians 13 is probably (and rightly) one of the most famous chapters in the Bible. It's often read at weddings and funerals — but we hardly ever stop to wonder how it fits into Paul's argument in the letter where it originally appeared. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians covers an amazing variety of topics. It deals with a whole series of practical queries raised by the Corinthian church: divisions and factions; leadership and authority; money, status, work, slavery, sexuality, marriage and divorce, food, the position of women, and the role of charismatic gifts in the life of the church. It gives us a "fly-on-the wall" insight into the process of learning to become a church, at a time when the New Testament wasn't yet written, when there were no bishops, no theological colleges or Christian bookshops (and no Google!). Any questions that arose (and there were plenty) had to be thought through for the first time. So here we see Paul setting out with an engaging honesty to work out some answers to the questions raised by the Christians in Corinth — questions to which he does not always have a definitive answer (cf. 7.10, 12). And we see this young church at Corinth, 'warts and all', as they struggle to formulate questions and deal with day-to-day problems. They were not perfect, as we shall see: in fact this church seems to have caused Paul as much trouble as all his other churches put together. But if they had been, we wouldn't have had this letter — and we might have been able to get away with thinking that being a Christian was somehow easy and straightforward "in those days".

First-century Corinth was a bustling commercial centre, funnelling trade through from the eastern Mediterranean to the Adriatic and Rome. It had two ports, Cenchreae and Lechaem, one on each side of the Isthmus. It had a reputation as the 'Sin City' of the ancient world which may not be deserved — or at least no more than any other seaport, then and now. Above all, it was a cosmopolitan city with a constantly shifting population of merchants and businesspeople, bringing a regular influx of new ideas and new religions. But Paul is not addressing the city: he is addressing "the church of God in Corinth" (1.2), a church which is less than ten years old, but very conscious of its identity as a distinctive group within the city. So the questions they raise are not about how to become a Christian, but about how to go on being a Christian -- in other words, the kind of questions that concern us all, about the practicalities of living the Christian life in the real world that we all inhabit. Of course our world is very different from theirs, and some of the practical problems they face have to be translated so that we can appreciate their impact. But overall I believe that today's churches, as we move into the post-Christian (and post-Covid) society of the twenty-first century, can learn a lot from eavesdropping on the Corinthians' dialogue with Paul.

"Eavesdropping", of course, creates its own problems. Reading Paul's letters is like overhearing one half of a telephone conversation and trying to reconstruct what the other party is saying. So for me, part of the fascination of reading 1 Corinthians is trying to work out what was happening on the ground: what were the questions they asked Paul? What was in

the letter they wrote (7.1)? Who were Chloe's people (1.11), and what was the gossip they passed on to Paul? This is partly a matter of good detective work: reading attentively, looking for clues in the letter itself. But we can also draw on enormous resources of history and archaeology that help us build up a nuanced and sensitive picture of the social world of the Corinthian church.

But the conversation isn't just about ancient history. 1 Corinthians (like the whole Bible) is also a conversation partner with *us* — with the life of the Christian church down the centuries. Many of the topics Paul touches on in this letter are still hot topics in the church today. This is a text that has profoundly influenced the way Christians think today about topics that affect all our lives. So we'll be taking time to explore our side of the conversation too, and being open about our difficulties with it as we go along. Some of our difficulties arise from misunderstanding or taking things out of context — so it's really important to take time to understand the original context. Attentive reading may help us to realise that Paul isn't quite the bogeyman we might have thought! But some of our difficulties arise from changes in our own social world, and our own deeply-held convictions. Like the church of Paul's day, we will have differing views on some of these key issues — and we need to be open about that, and open to exploring with charity what it means to be the Body of Christ together. (And along the way learning to appreciate quite how radical ch.13 is!).

So welcome to the new series of TFTD! Tomorrow we'll take a look back at the founding of the Corinthian church in Acts ch.18.

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Father, we thank you for your Word. We thank you for the church at Corinth, which had the determination to ask questions -- and for the apostle Paul, who had the courage to try to work out answers. Give us both the courage to differ and the grace to recognize our fundamental unity in Christ, who died so that those who were once strangers should be reconciled in a single body to God through the cross. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

There has been a flood of serious studies of I Corinthians and its social world in recent years: these are just a selection.

- Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: texts and archaeology* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press 1990) gives a fascinating selection of first-century texts and documents relating to the city
- Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982) is a classic study and still in many ways the best introduction to the social issues in the letter.
- Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Grand Rapids/ Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster 1995).
- Anthony Thistleton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).
- Robert Evans, *Judge for Yourself: Reading 1 Corinthians* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003).
- N.T. Wright offers a vivid and fast-paced account of Paul's life and thought in *Paul: A Biography* (Harper Collins, 2018). His *1 Corinthians for Everyone* (SPCK) is always good value.
- Or for a more imaginative approach, try Paula Gooder, *Phoebe: A Story. Pauline Christianity in Narrative Form* (London: Hodder, 2018).