

BRIARCLIFF CHURCH
Small Group Study Guide: 1 Corinthians
Week of August 4 (Week 1)
1 Corinthians: Introduction



BACKGROUND

Author : Paul (1 Cor. 1:1)
Date : 53 or 54 AD
Provenance : Written from Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:8)
Destination : To the church at Corinth
Occasion : Oral reports (1 Cor. 1:11) and a letter from the Corinthians (1 Cor. 16:15-18).

READING 1 CORINTHIANS IN THE LIGHT OF THE CITY AND ITS CULTURE

The background information below is adapted from Anthony Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

The socio-economic and religious factors that made up the environment of the city of Corinth has a profound influence on one's understanding of Paul's letters to the church at Corinth.

1. The Distinctive Features of Corinth

- Corinth was a prosperous, bustling, international center of trade and industry due to its strategic location.
- Corinth inherited a large income from tourism, business, and manufacturing; thus, it attracted businesspeople for trade and tourists who came to watch the Isthmian Games (second to the Olympic Games).
- As a well-ordered Roman colony, it attracted an increasing number of immigrants who came in the hope of making their fortune.
- As an economically prosperous city, it set the stage for a deeply competitive, self-sufficient, and entrepreneurial culture marked by ambitions to succeed.
- Reflection: How do the Corinth-like features in Kansas City affect believers positively or negatively? How can we pray and look for avenues for ministry with the Corinth-like features in Kansas City or the Briarcliff Church neighborhood?

2. The Ethos

- **Competitiveness, Self-Achievement, and Self-Promotion**: The spirit of competition, self-achievement and promotion led the people to "cut corners" to bring instant success. Getting ahead was the order of the day. Corinth

enjoyed success-oriented versions of religion, thus the proclamation of a humiliated and crucified Christ was inexpressibly “shameful,” disgraceful, and “foolish” (1 Cor. 1:18-24).

- Self-Sufficiency, Local Autonomy and Freedom: Corinth had an abundance of natural resources and employment opportunities and was known as a provincial center for rhetoric, thus drawing many people to admire its facilities and spectacles. It is no surprise that when they became Christians, many people of Corinth carried over attitudes of self-sufficiency and Corinthian pride.
- Wisdom, Knowledge, and Freedom: Christians in Corinth championed knowledge and freedom to the detriment of weaker believers in the faith (1 Cor. 8:4, 7, 10, 12; 6:12). The favorite slogan in Corinth, “Liberty to do all things” (6:12a), received firm qualification and boundaries because “not everything is helpful” (6:12).
- The tendency to overvalue gifts of knowledge, wisdom and freedom over more basic gifts in everyday life, such as love and respect for others. (1 Cor. 1:4-7).
- Audience approval rhetoric: As opposed to Classical rhetoric that aimed at persuasion and effective communication of truth, the people of Corinth were influenced by a kind of rhetoric that was more concerned with “winning” than with truth (1 Cor. 2:2).

Reflection: How do you see the ethos of Corinth working in our world and churches today? How does this ethos negatively affect you as a believer? How can we positively utilize this ethos for the furtherance of the gospel (for e.g., at the workplace)?

3. The Issues in the Corinthian church

- Divisions (1 Cor. 1:10-4:21)
- Incest (1 Cor. 5:1-13)
- Lawsuits (1 Cor. 6:1-11)
- Sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:12-20)
- Marriage and singleness (1 Cor. 7:1-40)
- Food (1 Cor. 8:1-11:1)
- Head covering (1 Cor. 11:2-16)
- Abusing the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-34)
- Spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:1-14:40)
- Resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1-58)

Reflection: In the words of Tim Armitage: “The portrait of the church in the book of Ephesians is “textbook-like;” it is well-structured and the “ideal” church. But the portrait of the church in 1 Corinthians is “dairy-like”; it is messy. The list of issues

indicates that the church at Corinth was a “messy” church. Churches today are no different from the church at Corinth. One or more issues affect every church and every believer at different stages. What may be some issue(s) facing our church?

What kind of attitude and actions are required from believers to diffuse tension, division, and all sorts of Corinth-like issues in the church?

How does Paul present the character and nature of God in dealing with the issues in the Corinthian church?

4. The City of Corinth vis-à-vis Kansas City

- Paul’s Corinth was “at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world” (Gordon Fee, 3).
- The scattered pieces of evidence from Acts, 1 Corinthians, and Romans suggest that the church was, in many ways, a mirror of the city (Fee, 3).
- Corinth was a predominantly Gentile community, and as former pagans, they brought a Hellenistic worldview and ethical attitudes to the Christian faith. Although they were the Christian church in Corinth, an inordinate amount of Corinth remained in them, emerging in various attitudes and behaviors that required what Fee describes as “radical surgery without killing the patient” (Fee, 4). This letter attempts to address these challenges.

Application: We live with Christian love, grace, hope and ethics in the Corinth of our world.