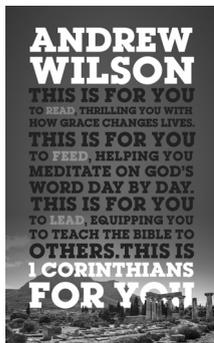




1 Corinthians

**The grace-changed
church**

by Andrew Wilson



1 Corinthians For You

These studies are adapted from *1 Corinthians For You*. If you are reading *1 Corinthians For You* alongside this Good Book Guide, here is how the studies in this booklet link to the chapters of *1 Corinthians For You*:

Study One → Ch 1-2	Study Five → Ch 6-7
Study Two → Ch 2-3	Study Six → Ch 8
Study Three → Ch 3-4	Study Seven → Ch 9-10
Study Four → Ch 5	Study Eight → Ch 11-12

Find out more about *1 Corinthians For You* at:
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The grace-changed church

The Good Book Guide to 1 Corinthians

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Introduction: Good Book Guides

Every Bible-study group is different—yours may take place in a church building, in a home or in a cafe, on a train, over a leisurely mid-morning coffee or squashed into a 30-minute lunch break. Your group may include new Christians, mature Christians, non-Christians, mums and tots, students, businessmen or teens. That's why we've designed these *Good Book Guides* to be flexible for use in many different situations.

Our aim in each session is to uncover the meaning of a passage, and see how it fits into the “big picture” of the Bible. But that can never be the end. We also need to appropriately apply what we have discovered to our lives. Let's take a look at what is included:

- ↔ **Talkabout:** Most groups need to “break the ice” at the beginning of a session, and here's the question that will do that. It's designed to get people talking around a subject that will be covered in the course of the Bible study.
- ↓ **Investigate:** The Bible text for each session is broken up into manageable chunks, with questions that aim to help you understand what the passage is about. The **Leader's Guide** contains **guidance for questions**, and sometimes ☒ additional “follow-up” questions.
- ⋮ **Explore more (optional):** These questions will help you connect what you have learned to other parts of the Bible, so you can begin to fit it all together like a jigsaw; or occasionally look at a part of the passage that's not dealt with in detail in the main study.
- **Apply:** As you go through a Bible study, you'll keep coming across **apply** sections. These are questions to get the group discussing what the Bible teaching means in practice for you and your church. ☒ **Getting personal** is an opportunity for you to think, plan and pray about the changes that you personally may need to make as a result of what you have learned.
- ↑ **Pray:** We want to encourage prayer that is rooted in God's word—in line with his concerns, purposes and promises. So each session ends with an opportunity to review the truths and challenges highlighted by the Bible study, and turn them into prayers of request and thanksgiving.

The **Leader's Guide** and introduction provide historical background information, explanations of the Bible texts for each session, ideas for **optional extra** activities and guidance on how best to help people uncover the truths of God's word.

Why study 1 Corinthians?

Roman Corinth was a large, bustling, commercial and pluralistic city in southern Greece. It was the regional capital of Achaia, known among other things for its port, its sexual promiscuity and its hosting of the biennial Isthmian games.

The apostle Paul had founded the church on his second missionary journey, spending a year and a half there (Acts 18:1-18). This letter was written a few years later, in the spring of AD 54 or 55, in response to receiving a worrying letter (see 1 Corinthians 7:1) and some even more worrying news (1:11) from the members of the church.

It is hard to be sure how large the church was. It cannot have been much less than 50, given all the names and households Paul mentions. But it is unlikely to have been more than 200, because the whole church met together in one place. If we imagine a church of 100 in a city of 50,000 we will not be too far out. It might encourage us to realise how similar those numbers are to the situation of many churches today.

Some New Testament churches struggled with opposition and persecution from the cities around them. The Corinthians faced the opposite problem: assimilation into a pagan, promiscuous, competitive and idolatrous culture. Much of Paul's effort in writing this letter—whether it relates to leadership, sexuality, the nature of the church, idol food, corporate worship or the resurrection—aims to re-establish the differences between the church and the city; between Christianity and idolatry. That is one of many reasons why it is such a helpful text for those of us who live in the post-Christian West. Paul tackles a huge variety of subjects, writing with punchy clarity while summarising the central themes of the Christian faith with real beauty.

Another reason to study 1 Corinthians is because the Corinthians were a mess, and God loved them anyway. This letter shows us grace in action. We get to watch an exasperated apostle talking to a rebellious and divisive church with a tenderness, affection and faith for transformation that can only come from the power of the Spirit, the example of Christ and the faithfulness of God. That's what this letter puts so richly on display. It brings hope to Corinthians everywhere, including you and me.



BIBLE TIMELINE

Where does 1 Corinthians fit into the whole story of God's word?

1 CORINTHIANS AD c54-55

AD 49-50

Paul preaches in Corinth and sets up the church

AD 51

Paul leaves Corinth

AD 54-55

Paul sends the letters of 1 Corinthians and then 2 Corinthians

1

1 Corinthians 1 – 2

SAVED AND SPIRIT-FILLED



talk about

1. What would you say are some of the most common symptoms and causes of division in the church?



investigate

The church at Corinth was in a mess. We will find that out very quickly. This letter gives a host of examples: squabbling, incest, sleeping with prostitutes, idolatry, drunkenness during Communion, chaotic worship services, denying the future resurrection, and who knows what else. This was a church that was divided along a whole range of fault lines.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

2. Given the state that the Corinthian church was in, what is surprising about the way Paul starts his letter?

DICTIONARY

Apostle (v 1): someone chosen and sent by Jesus to teach and serve the Christian church.

Sosthenes (v 1): probably Paul's scribe.

Sanctified (v 2): made clean and pure.

Holy (v 2): set apart; totally pure.

Grace (v 3,4): undeserved kindness.

3. List all the things that these verses tell us about Jesus.

In Paul's world, letters followed a fairly set pattern. After the introductory elements of verses 1-9, he then turns to the main reason for his letter.

➤ **Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17**

DICTIONARY

Apollos / Cephas (v 12): two other prominent church leaders.
Eloquence (v 17): a persuasive way of speaking.

4. What, according to these verses, was the primary problem in the Corinthian church (v 10-12)?

- Look ahead in your Bible at the summary headings in the rest of the letter. What else does the Corinthian church appear to have been divided over?

5. Why does it make no sense for Christians to divide around human leaders (v 13-17)?

➡ **apply**

Divisions between Christians today may not explicitly be about choosing a particular leader to follow, but Paul's warning still applies.

6. What secondary issues or individual loyalties do you think Christians today are most likely to divide over? What do we need to remember from these verses?





getting personal

Which are you more aware of in your church: the flaws that need correction, or the evidences of God's grace? How does Paul's introduction help you with this? Pause to give thanks for your church and for God's work in it.



investigate

The primary problem in the Corinthian church is division (v 10). But the root of division is almost always self-importance and arrogance. So before engaging with the factions and leaders in more detail in chapters 3 and 4, Paul looks first to cut the legs out from underneath worldly divisions by skewering human pride. He does this by drawing a series of contrasts—wise/foolish, strong/weak, influential/lowly—and showing how the gospel puts us on the “wrong” side of all of them.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18 – 2:5

7. Why does the Christian message sound foolish, both in its delivery (v 17-20) and its content (v 21-25)?

DICTIONARY

Righteousness (1:30): being in right relationship with God.

Holiness (v 30): set apart as clean and pure.

Redemption (v 30): paying a price to free a slave.

- Why does the Christian church look weak (v 26-31)?

- How does the gospel invert the world's expectations?

8. In what way have the Corinthians been boasting in human wisdom (v 12)? How do the truths of verses 28-31 counter the Corinthians' prideful division?



explore more

optional

▶ Re-read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

What lessons can we draw from these verses about the best way to go about gospel ministry?

Do Paul's words here mean that it is wrong to use "wise and persuasive words" or powerful language in our talks and sermons? Why/why not?

▶ Read 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

9. What contrasts does Paul draw between "the wisdom of this age", and God's wisdom (v 6-9)? Which wisdom will triumph in the end?

10. What does Paul say in verses 10-16 about the role of the Spirit? Is this different to how we tend to talk about the Spirit? If so, in what way?



getting personal

“What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived”—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.” (2:9-10)

The eternal future God has prepared for us will be beyond anything we’ve ever experienced. The reassurance for Paul, however, is not that our future cannot be imagined but that it can—but only by the Spirit’s revelation (v 10). The Spirit provides a foretaste now of our unthinkably glorious future.

In what circumstances or areas of your life do you most need to hear this reassurance? How does it change your perspective on difficulties or disagreements in your life right now?



apply

11. Discuss occasions when you have experienced the things described below. How would this passage encourage or challenge you in those moments?

- The Christian message feels weak and foolish.

- We explain the gospel to people and they just don’t get it.

- We are tempted to feel inferior (or superior) about our own spirituality.





pray

Praise God for the message of Christ Jesus—your righteousness, holiness and redemption (1:30)—and for his Spirit who dwells in you.

Pray that you and your church would walk together in humble unity, and for your leaders—that they would “preach Christ crucified” week by week (1:23).

Pray for friends and family who regard the Christian message as foolishness; ask God to show them the power and wisdom of the cross by his Spirit.



1 1 Corinthians 1 – 2

SAVED AND SPIRIT-FILLED

THE BIG IDEA

The antidote to disunity in the church is the humbling message of Christ crucified—which looks weak and foolish in the world's eyes, but is revealed to us through the Spirit for our salvation.

SUMMARY

In Paul's world, letters followed a fairly set pattern and you can see it in chapter 1. You would identify yourself (v 1), then the people to whom you were writing (v 2), greeting them with peace (v 3; Paul adds "grace" too). Usually you would give thanks for the other person, whether for their health, their letter, their friendship, or something else (v 4-9). What is extraordinary about these verses is how Jesus-centred they are. He is mentioned by name nine times in nine verses! Because Paul is focused on Jesus and his grace, he is deeply grateful for the Corinthian church in spite of all that he knows about them.

With those introductory elements out of the way, you would then turn to the reason for your letter. In the case of 1 Corinthians, it is this: "that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought" (v 10). In light of all the issues that will crop up later, unity might not seem like the priority. But when you consider the major problems in the church, you notice that almost all of them are characterised by a combination of pride and division. There is pride and division over sexual ethics (chapters 5 – 6), litigation (chapter 6), marriage (chapter 7), idol food (chapters 8 – 10), corporate worship

(chapter 11), spiritual gifts (chapters 12 – 14) and even the resurrection (chapter 15).

First, Paul addresses their division over leaders. But before engaging with the factions in more detail in chapters 3 and 4, Paul looks first to cut the legs out from underneath worldly divisions in general by skewering human pride. He does this by contrasting the wisdom of God with the wisdom of the world, primarily through the cross of Christ (1:18-2:5) and the ministry of the Spirit (2:6-16). He makes a series of contrasts—wise/foolish, strong/weak, influential/lowly—and shows how the gospel puts us on the "wrong" side of all of them. In our preaching, our message and our very existence we are foolish, weak and lowly. So if we are going to blow our trumpets about anything, it had better not be ourselves, or any human leaders. Rather, "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord" (1:31).

OPTIONAL EXTRA

Watch a popular TV commercial and talk about the message it's communicating and the techniques it uses to get this across (sensuality, emotion, humour, etc). In 1 Corinthians 1 Paul says that the wisdom of the cross, as communicated through preaching, appears "foolish" both in its content and its delivery. But the wisdom of this age—as expressed in the commercial—is "coming to nothing" (2:6) while the wisdom of God is the power of salvation and will last for eternity (see Q 7 and 9).

GUIDANCE FOR QUESTIONS

1. What would you say are some of the most common symptoms and causes of

division in the church? Allow your group to share their ideas. Symptoms of division include: gossip, grumbling and power struggles, as well as just quietly ignoring each other. When we come to consider the major problems in the Corinthian church, we'll see that almost all of them are characterised by a combination of pride and division (and the same is true today).

2. Given the state that the Corinthian church was in, what is surprising about the way Paul starts his letter?

If you or I had written 1 Corinthians, it might have been a lot shorter: *Just stop it!* The length of Paul's letter and the care with which it is written reveal how much Paul loves the Corinthians and wants to win them over. Paul is not blustering his way through an angry rant. Instead, Paul is deeply grateful for the church in spite of all that he knows about them (v 4). He affirms God's call on their lives—to be "holy people" (v 2)—and acknowledges God's grace at work among them (v 6) and the spiritual gifts that God has poured out on the church (v 7). Most strikingly, Paul displays an astonishing level of confidence in the Corinthians' future (v 8). God's commitment to his people is the guarantee that the Corinthians will make it, in spite of all the sin that characterises them at the moment (and all the warnings Paul will issue later).

3. List all the things that these verses tell us about Jesus.

Jesus Christ is mentioned by name nine times in nine verses. He is the one who called Paul to be an apostle (v 1), the one in whom the Corinthians have been made holy and upon whose name they call (v 2), the giver of grace (v 3) and the one in whom that grace has been given (v 4). Jesus is the source of all riches (v 5), the subject of Paul's preaching (v 6)

and the basis for Christian hope (v 7). The whole of history is pointing forward to the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (v 8), when he shall return as Judge and King. Yet this same Jesus is the one with whom we have fellowship—communion, life-in-common—in the meantime: "Jesus Christ our Lord" (v 9). To Paul, Jesus is everything.

4. What, according to these verses, was the primary problem in the Corinthian church (v 10-12)?

Division (v 10). There are quarrels in the church, which Paul knows because people from Chloe's household have told him (v 11). There are factions in the church, each identifying with a different leader: Paul, Apollos, Peter (called by his Aramaic name, Cephas) and Christ (v 12).

• Look ahead in your Bible at the summary headings in the rest of the letter. What else does the Corinthian church appear to have been divided over?

There is pride and division over leaders (chapters 1 – 4), sexual ethics (chapters 5 – 6), litigation (chapter 6), marriage (chapter 7), idol food (chapters 8 – 10), corporate worship (chapter 11), spiritual gifts (chapters 12 – 14) and even the resurrection (chapter 15). Taken in isolation, each issue could be tackled on its own merits. But Paul is a wise pastor. He can see the common thread—division—running through all the problems. So he addresses it up front, and gets to the specifics later.

5. Why does it make no sense for Christians to divide around human leaders (v 13-17)?

Paul is horrified by the Corinthians' division around different leaders (1:13). *Christ is not divided, is he?* says Paul—*So how can the church be? Paul wasn't crucified for you, was he, so how can you possibly put his name alongside*

that of Jesus? You weren't baptised into the name of Paul, were you? So why would you put loyalty to me ahead of loyalty to the body of Christ? Paul is responding so quickly that he forgets how many people he has baptised, and has to correct himself (v 14-16). But he makes this point because he wants to remind the Corinthians that their ultimate allegiance is to Jesus rather than to him. Baptism was never Paul's primary mission. His primary mission was to preach the gospel of Christ, in which all human self-importance comes to nothing (v 17).

6. APPLY: What secondary issues or individual loyalties do you think Christians today are most likely to divide over? What do we need to remember from these verses? Allow your group to share their perception of your particular context. The thing we need to remember is that our ultimate allegiance is to Jesus—he is the one who has done everything for us, and for every one of us. So even when we disagree, we are united around Christ.

7. Why does the Christian message sound foolish, both in its delivery (v 17-20) and its content (v 21-25)? The world, in Paul's day, had all sorts of techniques to make its messages more acceptable: wisdom, eloquence, intelligence, legal reasoning, philosophy (v 17-20). Our generation has added the power of advertising, popular music, newspapers, movies, websites and TV shows. These all push a particular vision of the true, the good or the beautiful, and by presenting it well they make it seem more plausible. Meanwhile the church is stuck with a method that looked foolish in ancient Corinth and looks even more foolish now: preaching. Not with tricks or stunts. Just proclaiming what God has done in Christ

and trusting that he will use that message to turn people's lives around.

It is not just the method that is foolish, though; the message is foolish as well (v 22-23). Jewish people were eager for "signs" that would accompany and authorise the Messiah, just like many today look for religious experiences (e.g. Matthew 12:38; 16:1; John 2:18; 4:48). Greek people prized *sophia*, "wisdom," in the same way that modern people might prize reason or science. In that world, Paul says, our message is preposterous: a crucified Messiah looks like a complete contradiction to Jews, and utter lunacy to everyone else.

- **Why does the Christian church look weak (v 26-31)?** The Corinthian church, like most revivals in church history, was mainly drawn from among the poor. Look at yourselves, Paul says. When you became believers, you weren't a high-powered, rich, upmarket group of movers and shakers (v 26). But God saved you anyway. He took hold of the weak, the shameful, the vulnerable, the poor and the poorly educated, and turned them—you!—into demonstrations of his transforming favour.
- **How does the gospel invert the world's expectations?** When this crazy message of Christ crucified is heard by people whom God has called, whether they are Jews or Gentiles, it turns out to be both God's power and his wisdom (v 24). The most apparently ridiculous thing that God has ever done is, it turns out, far smarter than the cleverest thing that human beings have ever come up with (v 25). The Corinthians were foolish people, who heard a foolish message preached in a foolish way—and God has demonstrated his wisdom in them so powerfully that the smartest people on earth are left scratching their heads (v 27, 30-31).

8. In what way have the Corinthians been boasting in human wisdom (v 12)? How do the truths of verses 28-31 counter the Corinthian's prideful division? This is an opportunity for your group to summarise what you've seen so far. The Corinthians are not wise, righteous, holy and redeemed because of their backgrounds, the leaders they follow, or the gifts that they have, but because they are "in Christ Jesus" (v 30). So if they're going to boast about anything, they should boast in the Lord (v 31).

EXPLORE MORE

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

- **What lessons can we draw from these verses [1 Corinthians 2:1-5] about the best way to go about gospel ministry?**

What you win people with is what you win them to. Youth and children's ministers know this better than anyone. Attracting a crowd is easy, if you provide enough games, sweets, sports or free pizza. But if you win them with pizza then, when the pizza disappears, so do they. Paul was well aware of the dangers of attracting people to the wrong thing: "I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God" (2:1), nor did he display an impressive sense of self-confidence (v 3). Crowds in the ancient world would gather much more easily around a rhetorically gifted or impassioned speaker; and in many ways they still do. But if people were gathering to eloquence or wisdom then, when a more eloquent or educated person showed up, the crowd would disappear. (Sadly there are countless parallels in the history of Christian mission.) So "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (v 2). If what you are offering is Jesus

Christ, then the crowd will be an awful lot smaller—but the ones who come are much more likely to become disciples.

- **Do Paul's words here mean that it is wrong to use "wise and persuasive words" or powerful language in our talks and sermons? Why/why not?**

One of the puzzles of 1 Corinthians is that Paul repeatedly insists that he did not use eloquence, yet the letter is full of some of the most powerful and eloquent rhetoric in the whole of Scripture. There is the intense sarcasm of 4:8-13, the lyrical beauty of chapter 13, and sayings that we still use 20 centuries later: "the scum of the earth", "all things to all men", "faith that moves mountains" and "in the twinkling of an eye". But Paul's point is not that using language well is bad, or that he never does it himself. His point is that using language well is bad if it detracts from or substitutes for the message of Christ crucified. (There is nothing wrong with giving young people free pizza if the entire event is focused on Jesus.) Paul's priority is a demonstration of the Spirit's power (2:4), which in context refers to the preaching of the cross rather than the signs and wonders that some people might expect.

- **9. What contrasts does Paul draw between "the wisdom of this age", and God's wisdom (v 6-9)? Which wisdom will triumph in the end?**

- "The wisdom of this age", is immature and changeable (v 6). Each generation overturns the consensus of the previous one on important subjects, not just scientifically but morally. Human beings, like small children, are continually drawn to new things. The wisdom of God, by contrast, is timeless. It is mature, changeless and stable.

- Paul contrasts the “rulers of this age” with “the Lord of glory” (v 8). Roman rulers were committed to military power, pride, worldly glory and the brutal suppression of those who challenged them. Israel’s leaders had their own wisdom, and clearly thought that sacrificing Jesus was a price worth paying for protecting the status quo (John 11:47-53). On Good Friday, the rulers of this age looked to have won, as usual. But by Sunday morning things looked very different. The Lord of glory and the wisdom of God was vindicated.
- The wisdom and the rulers of this age are “coming to nothing” (v 6); the insights and influencers of this age are breathtakingly short-lived. The wisdom and rule of God, on the other hand, will last for ever and be unutterably glorious (v 9).

10. What does Paul say in verses 10-16 about the role of the Spirit? Is this different to how we tend to talk about the Spirit? If so, in what way? The

Spirit’s work is described here not in terms of gifting and service—though these are hugely important (see chapters 12 – 14)—but in terms of revelation, knowledge and discernment. Paul wants the Corinthians to see that the heart of the Spirit’s work is to bring revelation of Jesus to the church—revelation which, if taken on board, will lead the Corinthians away from division and pride and towards humility and unity. Without the Spirit, we would have no access to the thoughts of God (v 11) and would end up with nothing more than the spirit of the world. With him, however, “we may understand what God has freely given us” (v 12). Paul is making a subtle but crucial point. The Spirit does not seek to reveal obscure practices and secret codes, let alone things which would make some Christians feel superior to others (as was happening in

1st-century Corinth and sadly still happens in churches today). He seeks to reveal whatever God has freely given for us to know, and he reveals it to anyone who believes.

11. APPLY: Discuss occasions when you have experienced the things described below. How would this passage encourage or challenge you in those moments?

- **The Christian message feels weak and foolish.** These verses make clear that this is to be expected! But they also encourage us that the message of the cross really is the power of salvation (1:18), and that it has been and will be vindicated as true wisdom from God.
- **We explain the gospel to people and they just don’t get it.** Gospel ministry is about “explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words” (2:13). This means you will get a lot of blank faces from unspiritual people, because they have no idea what you are on about (v 14). But when you are talking to people of the Spirit—which here means all believers rather than an elite subgroup—you will find they discern things spiritually and not just humanly (v 15).
- **We are tempted to feel inferior (or superior) about our own spirituality.** As Christians we need not feel inferior to those who claim to be spiritual (whether we encounter them inside or outside the church), because we have the Spirit of God (v 12). And we cannot feel superior to people whose practical expression of Christianity looks different from ours (as we will see again in chapters 12 – 14). Instead, we can be secure in the knowledge that God’s thoughts are not out of reach. They have been made known to us in the cross of Christ, the gift of the Spirit and the revelation of the word.

