

# WHITE MEMORIAL — PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH —

## WMPC - Men's Bible Study

First Corinthians - Winter-Spring 2017

Lesson 1

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### Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-17

#### Three Questions:

**Q1:** Paul begins the letter by appealing to his own calling as an apostle and to the calling of the church in Corinth, they who are “called to be saints.” What do you think Paul is up to in beginning the letter this way? In a letter that deals largely in concrete issues of behavior, why would Paul begin his address by employing their theological designations: “those made holy in Christ,” “saints?” Are *you* and/or *we* addressed by Paul anywhere in the letter’s salutation?

**Q2:** If you’re at all familiar with some of the subject matter Paul takes up in this letter, it may surprise you to read Paul addressing the letter to “those who have been made holy to God in Christ Jesus, who are called to be God’s people” (1:2, CEB). Even here in chapter 1, we’re being introduced to behaviors that most of us wouldn’t qualify as “holy,” righteous behavior. Keeping in mind that to be “sanctified” (1:2, NRSV) means being made holy, how would you define holiness? What do you think is required in order to be holy? For a deeper connection to the Old Testament in your response, discuss these questions in light of Leviticus 19:1-2.

**Q3:** 1:10-17. Based on the information that Paul has received from “Chloe’s people” (1:11), some of the Corinthian Christians appear to be rallying around the names of various leaders in the early church. What is so insidious about the divisions being made? Do you think the leaders they’re claiming to belong to (over and against other leaders) are part of the problem, or have these divisions arisen from among the people? Why do you think Paul is so adamant in his appeal to unity among them, based on what you read in 1:1-9?

#### Three Insights:

**I1: *First Corinthians?*** The title “First Corinthians”—and correspondingly “Second Corinthians”—is misleading. This is *not* Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth, as 1 Cor 5:9 indicates that at least one other correspondence has occurred: “I wrote to you in my [earlier] letter...” This prior correspondence, however, is lost to us. (Some scholars assert that a fragment of this missing correspondence may be preserved in Second Corinthians 6:14-7:1.) Luke’s account of Paul’s founding of the Christian community in Corinth (Acts 18:1-11) informs us that Paul spent 18 months preaching and teaching there. And, as was his custom, Paul departed from them when he estimated that the community was “up and running” on its own—i.e., leadership beyond himself was established in sufficient confidence that the gospel of Christ crucified would be preached and lived out in his absence. Evidently, Paul had been away from Corinth long enough for some serious problems to arise!

**I2: *Someone Else’s Mail.*** Reading Paul’s letter to this fledgling 1st-century Corinthian congregation can be a bit like reading someone else’s mail. (This analogy applies to all the New Testament epistles, to be sure.) Richard Hays, a New Testament scholar at Duke, uses this analogy as a way to begin discussing the difficulty of reading the letter as though it was actually addressed to us, an audience receiving it almost 2000 years later. He writes the following:

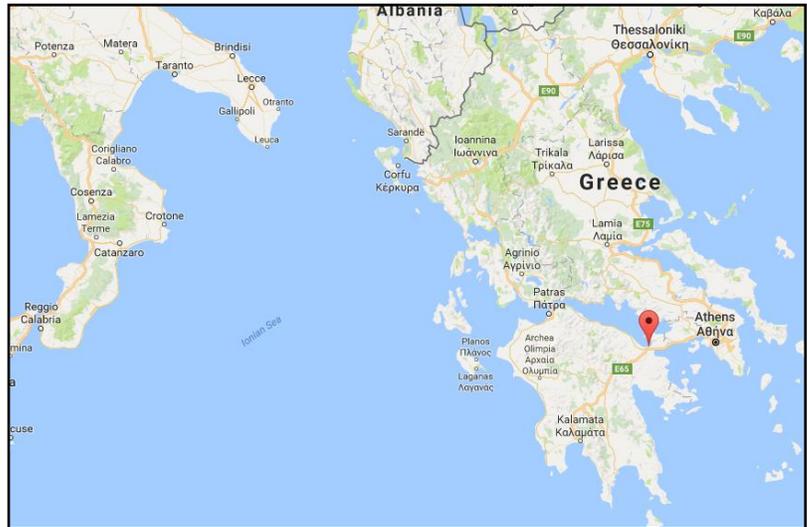
“What hermeneutical maneuvers permit us to read these particular pastoral instructions as God’s word to us? ... To discern *how* the word comes to us through this ancient letter, we must be alert to discovering imaginative *analogies* between the world of the letter and the world we inhabit. Recognizing that First Corinthians was not written to us, we learn to read it as though it were. We project ourselves

imaginatively into the faraway life of the Corinthian congregation and thereby learn to see our own lives in strange and challenging new ways.”

And here’s the crucial qualification:

“Since it is *God’s* truth for which we listen, however, our work of interpretation must never be confused with mere imaginative cleverness on our part; we can read someone else’s mail as God’s word to us only because God has chosen—oddly, we might think—to convey ongoing guidance to his people though the finite medium of this specific text.”<sup>1</sup>

**I3: City of Corinth.** Paul’s formation of a Christian community in the city of Corinth was no willy-nilly endeavor. The setting—both cultural and topographical—of the place was an ideal location to plant a Christian community. Corinth was a lively seaport located on an isthmus in Greece, not all that far from Athens. The city was destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. and then rebuilt by Julius Caesar around 44 B.C.. The city’s symbolic order (its laws, political structure, cultural values, norms) was Roman in flavor, even though it was located in Greece. And the relatively young city’s economy benefited greatly from its location between two major sea ports.



While a small Jewish community existed in the city, the Corinthian church (comprised of numerous small ‘house assemblies’) was largely Gentile—an important thing to note while considering the audience of the letter. Furthermore, Hays encourages us to remember that Paul “was writing to a church in a city only a few generations removed from its founding by colonists seeking upward social mobility” (3). That should sound vaguely familiar (at the very least!) to American readers.

**Links for further study:**

**L1:** Here’s a [link](#) to The Bible Project’s visual walkthrough of First Corinthians.

**L2:** 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 is the beginning of an extended section (1:10-4:21) in which Paul admonishes the Corinthian congregation(s) to be unified in their unique proclamation and worship of the crucified Messiah, Jesus Christ: *the* one certain ground for unity in the Church. Here’s a short prayer for church unity that is taken from *The Book of Common Prayer*:

Almighty Father, whose blessed Son before his passion prayed for his disciples that they might be one, as you and he are one: Grant that your Church, being bound together in love and obedience to you, may be united in one body by the one Spirit, that the world may believe in him whom you have sent, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), pp. 1-2.

**L3:** [“Foolish Belonging: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18,” by Lillian Daniel!](#) This is a brief reflection on the latter part of our passage this week. Here’s a sample: “Paul refuses to allow others to belong to him, and in so doing he refuses to belong to himself. God’s story does not begin or end with him, but in Christ. Paul turns us away from our own pleasure and comfort to the cross.”