

INVITATION TO 1 CORINTHIANS

The book of Acts describes how Paul, Silas and Timothy brought the good news about Jesus the Messiah to Macedonia (northern Greece), and then had to flee to Achaia (southern Greece) for their own safety (see pp. 1550–1551). From Athens Paul sent two letters of encouragement and instruction to the believers he'd left behind in Thessalonica (see pp. 1571–1581). He then traveled to Corinth, a wealthy and cosmopolitan commercial center. Many people became followers of Jesus there, and he stayed for a year and a half to teach them. But Paul understood that his primary mission was to bring the good news about Jesus to places where it had never been heard before. So he reported back to the Christian leaders in Jerusalem and Antioch, then set out again. Beginning around AD 53 he settled for two years in Ephesus. And since that city was right across the Aegean Sea from Corinth, he was able to continue advising the Corinthian believers through letters and visits. The Corinthians wrote to Paul, in a letter we no longer have, to ask him some questions and defend some of their practices. : They'd adopted the common Greek idea that the physical world is bad, so they wanted to free the human spirit from the body. One way they were trying to do this was by denying the body its pleasures. They didn't think that husbands and wives should have sexual relations with each other, and they were encouraging engaged couples not to get married. They asked Paul's advice about this. : The desire to free the spirit from the body also led some of the Corinthians to deny the resurrection. In their letter they challenged Paul to provide details of the resurrection if he wanted them to believe in it. : Some of them also wanted to keep attending ceremonial meals held in honor of pagan gods. They argued that their participation in these meals was spiritually harmless because these weren't real gods. : The

Corinthians had also learned that God can give the ability to speak in tongues, that is, to speak another language without having to study it first. They were eager to receive this gift and use it in their worship. But they were confused when some of their members began saying things like Jesus be cursed. : Finally, they asked Paul how to take a collection to assist the poor, and how they could be sure this offering would really reach those it was intended to help. Stephanas, Fortunas and Achaicus, three members of the community of Jesus-followers in Corinth, carried this letter over to Paul. Around the same time, servants of an Ephesian woman named Chloe returned from doing some business in Corinth and told Paul about additional problems. : For one thing, the community of Jesus'followers was dividing into factions devoted to one or another of the early Christian leaders. These factions were modeled after the exclusive schools that gathered around philosophers of the day. : The Corinthians had apparently misunderstood or misapplied Paul's earlier advice about how to deal with people in their community who were living immoral lives. : Chloe's servants also reported that the Corinthians were taking one another to court in lawsuits; : that there was a dispute in the church about wearing headcoverings in worship; : and that when the community gathered for the Lord's Supper, which was supposed to be a shared meal, the rich were eating by themselves, leaving the poor to go hungry. Paul addresses all of these matters in the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. This letter gives us a glimpse into what life was like in a community of believers twenty years after Jesus' resurrection. At the same time, it contains practical advice that's still of great value for communities and believers today. It shows an early Christian leader teaching, correcting, challenging and even pleading with the friends he's brought to the faith, trying to help them consistently follow the new way of life that Jesus introduced. Paul tells these believers that

this world in its present form is passing away, but they can still give themselves fully to the work of the Lord, knowing that their labor in the Lord is not in vain. The coming resurrection of the dead, and the new world it will introduce, will show the value of all their current efforts. Paul's practical teaching on how to consistently embody the new life of God's kingdom during a particular scene in the biblical drama gives us great insight as we seek to take up our own roles today.

