

THE STORY

Adult Sunday School Lesson Guide

Chapter 29

Paul's Mission

Timeless Truth: The gospel spreads to the civilized world.

Teacher's Background Notes

As stated previously, Acts is a book of transitions. As Paul now takes center stage as the leader of the church and Peter fades into the background, so too does the growing Gentile flavor of the church take center stage. Many people consider the church in Jerusalem (Acts 2-8) to be *the* model for all churches for all time, but it is not. The church in Jerusalem was formed out of Jewish followers of Christ. These religious Jews were already well acquainted with YHWH, the Law, sin and salvation. They awaited their coming Messiah in hopeful expectation. It was a very small leap for them to take the next step to believe. However, as we've already seen, their faith in Jesus came at a steep price. They were opposed by the religious powers and experienced severe persecution making it absolutely necessary to have all things in common just to survive. Under severe persecution, the believers scattered to other parts of the region and world taking with them the gospel. This too is a significant transition. Israel was centered in one land and focused on one city for centralized worship. God's plan for the church was one of decentralization away from Jerusalem and into other parts of the world.

After Paul's conversion and about 14 years in his own spiritual development, he began his missionary work to the Gentiles. His custom was to go to the synagogues first because, like in Jerusalem, these people were one step away from believing in Messiah Jesus. Rejected by most, he would then focus his efforts on the Gentile population of a city. These people were at a different spiritual starting point and his evangelistic methods were altered to meet them exactly where they were. His message of the gospel did not change, but his methods did. He could not reason from the Scriptures with them as he could the Jews, for they did not know the Scriptures. Their spiritual experiences were largely with pagan Greek and Roman gods and goddesses.

Paul's letters to each church reveal a wide array of problems specific to each individual location. No two churches were alike. Hence, the Jerusalem model is not the only model for a vibrant church! We should all strive to be like the Thessalonians whom he held up as the model for all believers! Their faith and behavior was not a problem, their suffering was. In contrast, the church in Corinth faced serious sin issues, grappled with applying their faith to daily living, and endured much infighting, so Paul addressed those specific issues with them. We must be cautious as we study his various letters to recognize that he was in fact writing to a specific people in a specific location for specific reasons. While all Scripture has timeless truth in some way, we must not hastily apply each instruction in an apples-for-apples way. For example, the Corinthians were unsure about whether or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols. We do not have that problem today.



THE WHOLE FAMILY | THE WHOLE BIBLE | THE WHOLE YEAR

Yet we can glean applicable principles from Paul's instructions to help us discern righteous living under different but similar circumstances.

Your students may notice in their reading of the Acts portion of the chapter that it becomes first person during Paul's second missionary journey. Luke joined the team and now writes as a participating eyewitness. He is an excellent historian, but also nuances his writing to highlight other points too. Luke intentionally noted women in his writing, and their equality in Christ. Priscilla's name is mentioned before Aquila, indicating that she was more notable than her husband. He highlighted Lydia's conversion and noted that the church was in her home. This is yet another transition from Judaism to Christianity.

This lesson plan offers two very different approaches to the material. Option one spotlights the missional aspect of Acts. This was a new age with new methods. Though Gentiles could come to the Jews, the Jews were not missional in taking the message out. What Paul and Barnabas began has continued to be carried out for centuries, though with different intensities during different eras in the history of the Church. Our missionaries today face challenges that are similar to Paul's but also challenges that are unique to each specific situation. This lesson provides an opportunity for your students to hear of the experiences of the contemporary missionary, gain appreciation for his or her efforts and perhaps commit to supporting missions in prayer and in material needs.

Lesson plan two broadly overviews Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. It is not intended to dig deeply into the specifics of the epistle, but to overview the conditions of the culture that help us to understand the context in which the letter was penned. In exploring the cultural issues of Corinth we discover a culture not unlike our own. It helps us understand why Paul wrote to them the things that he did. Here we find many applications for us today. There is a PowerPoint presentation as an aid to this lesson that includes maps, photographs and cultural information to help your students' overview. It includes notes with the slides for a guided explanation of the culture. The last four slides are the discussion questions at the end of the lesson plan.

Lesson Plan 1: Spotlight on Missions

The first part of Acts (ch. 1-8) was centered on Jerusalem. In fact, most of the Old Testament was centered on Jerusalem. It was the location of the temple so it was the focal point of worship that united the twelve tribes of Israel into a central community. But now that Messiah had come and the redemptive work of Christ on the cross was finished, it was time that the Good News spread out from Jerusalem. God used the persecution of Christ-followers in Jerusalem to prod believers into neighboring areas of Judea, Samaria and other parts of the world just as Jesus had said (Acts 1:8).

Acts is a book of transitions and one of the major transitions is from Peter as the central figure to Paul as the central figure. God's plan for Paul was that he would be a missionary to the Gentile world (Acts 9:15). Fulfilling God's special missional call upon his life, Paul embarked on three major missionary journeys as recorded in this chapter of *The Story*, and the book of Acts. This lesson plan option aims to connect Paul's life as a missionary to the contemporary mission of the church to reach people for Christ in foreign lands.

Invite a guest speaker to your class to discuss his or her experience doing foreign mission work. Provide some interview questions to your speaker so that he or she can



know the direction you would like his talk to take. You can either allow this person to share his or her experience, or you could use an interview format whereby you ask guided questions and give your guest speaker ample time to answer. Then open the floor up for questions from your students. Here are some possible questions to consider using:

- When did you begin to feel called into foreign mission work and how was that call confirmed?
- What drew you to this particular people group?
- What have been some of the cultural challenges you have faced there?
- Paul reasoned from the Scriptures with the Jews to reach them, but he took different approaches to reach the Gentiles. What have you found to be the best way to share the gospel in your mission work?
- Have you personally endured persecution or rejection while serving there?
- What are two or three things you wished American Christians understood better about foreign mission work?

Wrap up your class time by asking your missionary guest what his/her prayer needs might be, and invite your students to extend a hand or surround him/her as you offer up a prayer for strength, protection, and open hearts to receive the gospel.

Lesson Plan 2: The Christian Life in a Corinthian World

What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas! Just do it! You only live once! Our culture is marked by indulgence, immorality and self-gratification. But as the wise Solomon once wrote, “There is nothing new under the sun,” (Eccl. 1:9c). The parallels between ancient Corinth and contemporary America are uncanny, which makes the lessons from this letter particularly applicable to us today. While all of the books of the Bible are best understood within their historical context, the issues addressed in this particular epistle can only really be appreciated within the broader context of the cultural influences of the time. As we explore the challenges that Paul faced in Corinth, we will begin to see that his challenges were not so different from our own. Therefore, we will find a wealth of practical application from this portion of Scripture.

A PowerPoint presentation has been included with this lesson plan to help guide your lesson and provide a good visual aid to your students: [Adult_SS_Ch29_Corinthian_World.ppt](#). It includes an historical context, maps, photographs and cultural insights to help set the stage for the “Corinthian Church” and “Christian Life” part of this lesson. Because there is background information included in the “notes” portion of each slide, the “Corinthian World” portion of the lesson plan outline has been scaled down to eliminate redundancy.



I. The Corinthian World

- A. The Corinthian world was fraught with vice and sin, wealth and decadence. When Paul was rejected by the Jews there, he must have thought that there was no one else who would hear the gospel, let alone believe it! This helps explain the vision that Paul had in Corinth that Luke recorded for us. The Lord spoke to Paul and encouraged him to be unafraid. He said, “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city,” (p. 344, Acts 18:9-10).
- B. The Corinthian world was a stronghold of worldly philosophy, cultural immorality and pagan idolatry. With Athens only 45 miles away, the Greeks prided themselves on their philosophical debates and their refined knowledge. The Corinthians’ purposed to embrace the philosophical wisdom of her Athenian neighbors. Because of her strategic port location, the immorality of Corinth was legendary. The economy was kept afloat with trade, sailors and prostitution, gambling and other vices that accompanied the unsavory crowds that frequented this major metropolis. The temple of Aphrodite was known for its temple prostitutes and the term *corinthianize* was coined to describe sexual immorality. Along with Aphrodite, Apollo was also worshiped there in a huge temple. The city was made up of both have’s and have not’s. It had a wealthy class and it also had freed slaves who were poor which created some socioeconomic friction.
- C. The ancient Corinthian world had much in common with our contemporary culture. Many people lament that America was once a Christian nation, a beacon of freedom to worship, a society of law abiding citizens. Now, however, like Corinth, our culture has become corrupted (if indeed it was ever a Christian nation which remains a topic of debate beyond the scope of this lesson). A worldly philosophy permeates our educational system. Sexual immorality has become so mainstreamed that we are desensitized to its far-reaching tentacles, and the chaste are viewed with a wary eye. Pockets of vice provide a playground for otherwise sensible people. We are a culture of “anything goes,” even using our own lusts a marketing tool to draw people toward decadence and self-gratification regardless of the high cost financially, morally or personally.

II. The Corinthian Church Correction

- A. It was Paul’s habit to go to the synagogue first. Those in the synagogue would be prepared to receive the gospel of Jesus as their Messiah made ready by their knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures that anticipated the coming One. The Jews were steeped in the Law, so they understood sin and its implications for judgment, as well as the hope that comes from the One True God.
- B. While some Jews gladly embraced Jesus as Messiah, most did not. Paul was thrown out of the synagogue so he brushed himself off and took the Good



News to the Gentile population. As already noted, the Gentile populations' only knowledge of gods came from their pagan surroundings. Sin was not shameful, for it was not even known to be sin! It is from these roots that the baby church in Corinth sprung forth. Paul had his work cut out for him. He, along with Timothy, Silas, Priscilla, Aquila and eventually Apollos and Peter all schooled these Gentiles in the knowledge and grace of Jesus Christ.

- C. Paul eventually moved on. While residing in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, word came to him that there were big problems in the Corinthian Church. He had poured a year and a half of his life into them, so he had earned the right and had the responsibility to correct these carnal Christians.

D. The Corinthian Church was marked by immaturity.

Paul said, "I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ...You are still not ready. You are still worldly," (1 Cor. 3:1-3). Grow up! They were not acting with Christian maturity but with immaturity. Their immaturity was manifesting itself in diverse ways.

1. **Divisions in the church:** Instead of maturing in the faith under the discipleship of the great church leaders that came to Corinth, they splintered into groups around the different leaders. Paul said, "I appeal to you...that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be united in mind and thought... One of you says, 'I follow Paul' another says 'I follow Apollos' another 'I follow Cephas' still another, 'I follow Christ,'" (1 Cor. 1:10-12).
2. **Divisions in worldview:** While Paul spoke the wisdom that comes from the Holy Spirit, many Corinthians were shaped by the worldly philosophical "wisdom" of the Greek culture. (1 Cor. 2) This caused further divisions between groups there. Paul encouraged the Christians by showing that the Spirit provides true wisdom.
3. **Divisions in daily living:** The believers had many questions about living out their faith in the real world. They still had to learn to navigate through decisions in daily life in a culture hostile to holy living. So they wrote to Paul for guidance in specific areas that caused them problems. First Corinthians 7-16 is the part of Paul's letter that speaks to these problems. Believers were filing law suits against one another instead of settling matters privately and justly among themselves. They needed guidance in marriage, divorce and living singly. They did not know how to handle dietary problems that were associated with the idolatry around them. Christians were disruptive during worship and were failing to honor the Lord's Supper as holy. A mature person would have understood that God's purpose for spiritual gifts is for serving the Body in love. However, these immature Corinthians were arguing over whose gift was more important, more glamorous even. Paul corrected their misguided notions and admonished them to love one another sacrificially instead of elevating one person's gifting over another.



4. **Divisions in doctrine:** Paul was aghast that some among them had apparently dismissed a crucial aspect of the gospel and its implications on the Christian life. They were denying the resurrection! Paul gave them a written remedial lesson in the essentials of the gospel, including the non-negotiable point that Jesus was raised from the dead (1 Cor. 15:3-8). Based on Jesus' resurrection from the dead, Paul argued that all believers should look forward in hopeful expectation of our own future redemption of our bodies. Just as Christ was resurrected to live forever, so too can all Christians look forward to eternal life in a resurrected body. Paul reminded them that this teaching was THE basis of the Christian faith. If we all will not be resurrected, then Jesus Himself must not have been resurrected because He too is fully man. If Jesus was not resurrected then we are all still dead in our sins and our faith is worthless (1 Cor. 15:13-17).

Paul corrected these misguided believers and urged them to grow up in Christian maturity.

E. The Corinthian Church was marked by immorality.

Immaturity necessarily leads to all kinds of problems including sexual immorality. These believers were coming from a culture that accepted immorality as the norm. In fact, temple prostitution was itself a form of pagan worship. Not only was it accepted and normal, it was spiritual too.

1. Paul was stunned to hear of the immorality within the Church. In one case, a man was sleeping with his father's wife—a sin that even the Gentiles in the community repudiated (1 Cor. 5:1). While the questions surrounding this particular sin are beyond the scope of this lesson, the point remains that believers in the Church were participating in sexually immoral behavior. (1 Cor. 5-6)
2. Paul was even more astonished with the Church's failure to address the sexual immorality among its members (1 Cor. 5). Paul knew full well that to live in the world means to live among sinners. But sin in the Church that goes unchecked will eventually pollute the whole body. "Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough?" (1 Cor. 5:6)
3. Many of the believers in this Church were coming out of sexual sin and into a relationship with Christ. They came from all forms of immorality including fornication (sexual relations outside of marriage), adultery, and various forms of homosexuality. But, like all sinners, they had been washed and sanctified by faith in Christ Jesus and were now in the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:9-11).
4. Sexual immorality is a unique kind of sin because it is in one's own body. The body is now the temple residence of the Spirit which was purchased at a very high price. Therefore, every believer must flee from sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:15-20)



III. Christian Living in a Corinthian World—Application for Today

- A. What then should we learn from this brief overview of the Corinthians' problems and Paul's mid-course correction of them? Given the uncanny parallels between our own culture and the ancient but decadent Corinthian culture, Paul's letter gives us insight into our own church today, warns us of pitfalls and directs us for discipling.
- B. The Christian life is marked by maturity. Grow up! It still applies to our church today. Christian maturity would solve many of our problems. A healthy church will always have believers at every level of maturity on the spectrum. A healthy church should have new converts who are rightly babes in Christ. It should have believers who are always growing, learning to navigate their faith in a Corinthian world. A healthy church also has mature believers who serve as the church's rudder, guiding and nurturing the younger believers in the faith. New converts who are rightly babes in Christ are not the problem. The problem erupts when those who have been believers for awhile continue to subsist on "milk" instead of "meat." Their failure to mature as believers will breed divisions within the Body, divisions in worldview, divisions in negotiating daily living and divisions in the doctrines of the faith. Without mature believers to nurture others, a church is doomed to disunity.
1. **Christian maturity produces unity in the Church.** Some of us have experienced the painful occurrence of a splintered Body or worse—a church split. Splintering is often a result of a small thing that could have been resolved maturely, but instead snowballed into a full split. Maturity does not necessarily result in uniformity, but mature believers will choose unity over winning. The mature give up their rights!
 2. **Christian maturity produces a biblical worldview.** Most new converts to the faith today bring with them a secular worldview. Many Christian homes cannot be distinguished from the non-Christian home in their approach to thinking about the world. Paul wrote to the Romans, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect," (Rom 12:2). We begin to view the world through God-tinted glasses, looking for His Upper Story work in Lower Story events. We consider carefully and thoughtfully what are God's priorities and how might we shape the world with them instead of allowing the world to shape us. We begin to treat people with Christ-like compassion, respect and dignity instead of treating people as does the world.
 3. **Christian maturity produces holy living.** In our ever-changing world we encounter new obstacles that are not necessarily addressed in the Bible. A mature Christian learns to apply biblical principles to new situations as he or she navigates through the choppy waters of daily living. Mature



Christians respect one another's freedom in Christ to make different decisions within the context of a biblical worldview.

4. **Christian maturity produces unity in essential doctrines and charity in the non-essentials.** The mature Christian also knows the difference. There are some teachings that must be adhered to or else fellowship should be broken. *Here is a good place to draw out thoughts from your students. What are the essentials?* Paul was a staunch advocate for maintaining the purity of the gospel, for salvation by grace through faith and nothing more, and sanctification by faith. We should defend the Triune God at all costs. We should hold to the truth of who is Jesus—fully God, fully man, fully paid the price of sin through His death and resurrection. We stand firm on the truth and reliability of the Scriptures as the revelation of God to us. But there are also many non-essentials that we can allow for in Christian love and freedom. *What are some non-essentials?* Instrumental music is one issue our church has dealt with. There is considerable debate about the order of events and the timing of the Lord's return among Christians. This is a non-essential doctrine which warrants our gracious charity toward our brothers and sisters who might interpret it differently.

- C. **The Christian life is marked by morality.** Like the Corinthian Church, our converts into our church are coming out of a culture saturated in immorality, especially sexual immorality. In years past, even non-Christians in our own culture adhered to moral standards that mirrored our own. It was difficult to know who was a Christian and who was not from a cursory observation. It is now sadly true that it is still difficult to know who is a Christian and who is not because our morals have been more shaped by our culture than by our relationship with Christ. Statistically, Christians' morality is just like our non-Christian neighbors' in fornication (pre-marital sex), adultery, pornography use, and divorce. It should not surprise us because our Christian converts are coming from a culture steeped in immorality. In other words, the starting point of most new Christians begins with a moral deficit.

What are the implications?

1. More intentional discipleship will be required than in the past. Just like Paul's time (and Timothy, Silas, etc.) with the Corinthian Church was more pastorally intensive, so must be our discipleship of new converts today.
2. Jewish converts already understood sin, God, and their long history of His work in their lives. Gentile converts began at square one. Today most converts to the faith are also at square one and we need to take care to nurture them as babes beginning with the most basic lessons.
3. While salvation and sanctification is by faith and the work of the Spirit in us, we must learn to walk by the Spirit through practice. The writer of Hebrews said, "By this time some of you ought to be teachers, but you



have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food...But solid food is for *the mature, who because of practice* have their senses trained to discern good and evil,” (Heb. 5:12, 14).

4. Many Christian converts have dabbled in other “spiritual things” that amount to idolatry just like the Corinthian Church. We must be intentional about helping these converts unlearn their former experiences and learn afresh the freedom and joy of a relationship with Christ.

Learning Activity: Discussion Questions

Materials needed:

- PowerPoint presentation, [Adult_SS_Ch29_Corinthian_World.ppt.](#), last 4 slides

These discussion questions are also in the accompanying PowerPoint slides so you can either project them or print a handout with these life application questions. Give your students time to bridge the gap between the ancient cultural experiences of the Corinthians and our own time by discussing some life application questions in small groups or with a partner.

1. Some of us come from a rich heritage of faith. Others of us came to faith out of very worldly circumstances like Corinth. In general, what are some advantages
2. In your group, choose no more than five traits that define what it means to be a “mature Christian”. Why is maturity important in the church? Be prepared to share your table’s five traits with the class.
3. How does the morality of our culture shape our Church and what are the implications for evangelism and discipleship?
4. Have you ever personally experienced or observed church infighting? What were the consequences?

