

THRESHOLD
BIBLE STUDY

PROCLAIMING
CHRIST CRUCIFIED

1 Corinthians

STEPHEN J. BINZ



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One Montauk Avenue, Suite 200

New London, CT 06320

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How to Use *Threshold Bible Study*

T*hreshold Bible Study* is a dynamic, informative, inspiring, and life-changing series that helps you learn about Scripture in a whole new way. Each book will help you explore new dimensions of faith and discover deeper insights for your life as a disciple of Jesus.

The threshold is a place of transition. The threshold of God's word invites you to enter that place where God's truth, goodness, and beauty can shine into your life and fill your mind and heart. Through the Holy Spirit, the threshold becomes holy ground, sacred space, and graced time. God can teach you best at the threshold, because God opens your life to his word and fills you with the Spirit of truth.

With *Threshold Bible Study*, each topic or book of the Bible is approached in a thematic way. You will understand and reflect on the biblical texts through overarching themes derived from biblical theology. Through this method, the study of Scripture will impact your life in a unique way and transform you from within.

These books are designed for maximum flexibility. Each study is presented in a workbook format, with sections for reading, reflecting, writing, discussing, and praying. Each *Threshold* book contains thirty lessons, which you can use for your daily study over the course of a month or which can be divided into six lessons per week, providing a group study of six weekly sessions. These studies are ideal for Bible study groups, small Christian communities, adult faith formation, student groups, Sunday school, neighborhood groups, and family reading, as well as for individual learning.

The commentary that follows each biblical passage launches your reflection on that passage and helps you begin to see its significance within the context of your contemporary experience. The questions following the commentary challenge you to understand the passage more fully and apply it to your own life. Space for writing after each question is ideal for personal study and also allows group participants to prepare in advance for the weekly discussion. The prayer helps conclude your study each day by integrating your learning into your relationship with God.

The method of *Threshold Bible Study* is rooted in the ancient tradition of *lectio divina*, whereby studying the Bible becomes a means of deeper intimacy with God and a transformed life. Reading and interpreting the text (*lectio*) is followed by reflective meditation on its message (*meditatio*). This reading and reflecting flows into prayer from the heart (*oratio* and *contemplatio*). In this way, one listens to God through the Scripture and then responds to God in prayer.

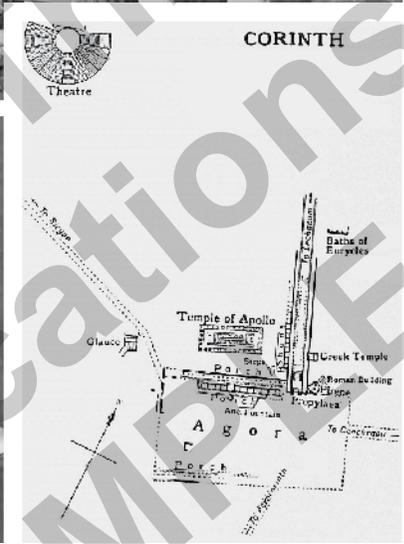
This ancient method assures you that Bible study is a matter of both the mind and the heart. It is not just an intellectual exercise to learn more and be able to discuss the Bible with others. It is, more importantly, a transforming experience. Reflecting on God's word, guided by the Holy Spirit, illumines the mind with wisdom and stirs the heart with zeal.

Following the personal Bible study, *Threshold Bible Study* offers ways to extend personal *lectio divina* into a weekly conversation with others. This communal experience will allow participants to enhance their appreciation of the message and build up a spiritual community (*collatio*). The end result will be to increase not only individual faith, but also faithful witness in the context of daily life (*operatio*).

When bringing *Threshold Bible Study* to a church community, try to make every effort to include as many people as possible. Many will want to study on their own; others will want to study with family, a group of friends, or a few work associates; some may want to commit themselves to share insights through a weekly conference call, daily text messaging, or an online social network; and others will want to gather weekly in established small groups.

By encouraging *Threshold Bible Study* and respecting the many ways people desire to make Bible study a regular part of their lives, you will widen the number of people in your church community who study the Bible regularly in whatever way they are able in their busy lives. Simply sign up people at the Sunday services and order bulk quantities for your church. Encourage people to follow the daily study as faithfully as they can. This encouragement can be through Sunday announcements, notices in parish publications, support on the church website, and other creative invitations and motivations.

Through the spiritual disciplines of Scripture reading, study, reflection, conversation, and prayer, *Threshold Bible Study* will help you experience God's grace more abundantly and root your life more deeply in Christ. The risen Jesus said: "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me" (Rev 3:20). Listen to the word of God, open the door, and cross the threshold to an unimaginable dwelling with God!





The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18

Proclaiming Christ Crucified

When Paul wrote this letter to the Christian community in Corinth, he was addressing a young church whose members were discerning how to be followers of Jesus in their own unique context. Their faith was rooted in the good news proclaimed by Paul when he founded the church in Corinth a few years before. According to the brief summary of his ministry in Corinth told in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 18, he had lived among them for a year and a half before moving on to other places. Now, he was writing to encourage them in their struggles as new believers and to address issues concerning the church's identity within its cultural surroundings.

Paul knew that receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ within a pluralistic, pagan world meant undergoing a conversion of the imagination. So, he repeatedly calls his readers to imagine the world and the purpose of their lives in radically new ways. They must learn to envision themselves as the heirs of God's work in ancient Israel, which has come to its completion in the saving death of the Messiah on the cross. They must come to understand how all personal and communal values are transformed by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

For this reason, Paul recalls to his readers that his foundational ministry among them was centered on "Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (2:2). His

purpose was solely to give witness to the cross through his words and deeds. In referring to Jesus Christ “crucified” (in the Greek perfect tense), Paul is describing an action completed in the past whose effects continue into the present. Thus, the identity of Christ always remains united with the cross. A living faith in Jesus Christ must always be grounded in a saving relationship with him as the crucified one.

Since this is the way that God has chosen to reveal his truth to the world, Paul determined that he would proclaim the gospel in ways that were consistent with its message of Jesus Christ crucified. The cross cannot be proclaimed with dazzling oratory but only in simplicity and weakness. So, Paul did not preach the gospel in ways that exhibited his own knowledge or eloquence. Rather, the cross molded his style and his entire message. He continually reminds his readers that God works through weakness and that the message of the cross seems foolish in the context of the Corinthian culture.

Paul addresses a Christian community in Corinth whose imaginations were, for the most part, not converted. Their new beliefs appear not to have created a sufficient social and moral realignment of their lives. Their lifestyle remained fully integrated into the pagan Corinthian society, a culture that is inherently antagonistic to the wisdom of the cross. As a result, Paul is seeking throughout this letter to establish firm boundaries between the church and its cultural surroundings, to convert the imaginations of believers to the values of the gospel, and to align their lives with the countercultural message of the cross.

Christians seemed strange to the pagan population because they had no temples, no particular national identity, and no established political ties with the Romans. They met in private homes, greeted each other with a holy kiss, and partook of the body and blood of the one who was crucified in Jerusalem. Paul’s preaching that Jesus alone is the Lord confronted the city’s cycle of religious festivals and threw into question the performance of sacrifices to the reigning emperor, which was so essential to the cultural life of the city. The overwhelming pressure to conform to the institutions of the city constantly tempted Christian converts to compromise their faith and return to their former pagan practices.

Paul has been away from Corinth long enough for serious problems to arise within the community. As he writes this letter, he knows that the church faces a significant moment of crisis and testing. He also knows that correct

living is rooted in correct believing about the significance of the crucified Christ. For this reason, Paul takes up all the difficult issues and reframes them in light of the cross. The crucified Christ is the focus for his discussion of factions within the church, lawsuits, sexual immorality, marriage, meat offered to idols, the Lord's supper, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection.

The gospel of the crucified Christ has tremendous implications for the social structure of the community of Christ's people. As the body of Christ, they are united in him—rich and poor, slave and free—in a network of mutual care and love. Status distinctions are now irrelevant “in the Lord,” and all power relations must be reinterpreted in light of the cross. Although the Corinthians had difficulty grasping this vision, Paul knows that submission to the cross will dispel vanity, selfishness, and all the ways that the gospel is being distorted in Corinth.

Reflection and discussion

- How does the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified impact the way that Paul proclaims the gospel?

- What does it mean to say that receiving the gospel means undergoing a conversion of the imagination?

The Setting of Paul's Letter

The city of Corinth was ideally located for the evangelizing mission of Paul. It was situated on a natural land bridge connecting mainland Greece to the north and the peninsula of Peloponnesus to the south. In addition, it had a harbor both to its east and its west, one leading straight to Asia and the other

to Italy. The city was, thus, a natural crossroads for travel both by land and by sea. Establishing a Christian community at such a crossroads held the promise of evangelizing all who passed through so that they might bring the good news of Christ back to their own cities and towns.

Although the ancient Greek city of Corinth had a long history, it had been destroyed in a war with the Romans in 146 BC, and most of its inhabitants were either killed or sold as slaves. After lying desolate for over a century, Corinth began to be rebuilt as a Roman colony by Julius Caesar in the year 44 BC. Although the new city was geographically in Greece, it was largely Roman in its architectural design and political organization. As a Roman colony, Corinth was built to cultivate the grandeur of Roman culture and values. Promoting the splendor of classical art, architecture, and religion, the city displayed temples and sculptures dedicated to the imperial family and the Roman gods.

The city was initially populated by freed slaves and Roman military veterans, but over time, Corinth became a lively city where people and cultures of every sort jostled together. As a center for international trade, it attracted people from distant lands, and its population became quite mixed. Although its common tongue was Greek, many other languages could be heard on the streets as well. Like most large cities of the time, Corinth also included a sizable Jewish population. The city quickly grew in prosperity, and by the time of Paul, it had become the largest and most dazzling of the cities of Greece.

In addition to its prosperous trade, Corinth hosted the Isthmian games, an athletic festival second only to the Olympic games in importance. This event, held once every two years, attracted large crowds and generated significant revenue for the city. Most probably Paul took advantage of this occasion to preach the gospel and introduce visitors to Jesus Christ. Evidence of this can be seen in the ways in which Paul uses images of athletic competition in his letter to refer to the Christian life. He urges the Corinthians to be serious about their mission, like athletes training for the race. As athletes train and contend for a perishable wreath, Christians seek the imperishable prize (9:25).

Because Corinth was a city of such diverse population, the church that Paul established there was a mixed, cosmopolitan community. The church was also marked by great diversity in wealth and social standing. The majority of its Christians seem to have been people of modest means and some of

them were slaves. Yet, the church also included members who were wealthy and held positions of power. Several owned houses large enough to hold sizable gatherings for the community.

These differences within the Christian community help us understand some of the conflicts that afflicted the church in Corinth. Although they had become Christians, they had not stopped being Corinthians. With its mixed population of Roman freedmen, indigenous Greeks, and immigrants from far and wide, the city displayed a blatant divide between the wealthy and the poor. Desire for individual honor and social standing among the influential resisted Paul's attempts to establish a community based on selfless generosity and the dignity of every individual. There was a lot about the gospel that the Corinthians had not yet grasped, and there was a lot about them that the gospel had not yet changed.

Although Paul came to Corinth in fear and trembling (2:3), he was willing to trust in the power of the cross and bring the good news to this daunting city. In fact, he proudly describes himself as the “father” of the church in Corinth (4:15). The letter demonstrates his resolve to nurture the community in the gospel. And, by the grace of God and the courage of Paul, the gospel of Jesus Christ took firm root there.

Reflection and discussion

- What would have been some of the biggest obstacles to the gospel in Corinth?

- What are some similarities between Paul's context in first-century Corinth and the twenty-first-century context of my life?

The Challenges of Interpreting Paul's Letter

Paul's letter is the continuation of an ongoing conversation between Paul and the church in Corinth. The letter serves as his substitute presence. He had written at least one previous letter to them (which has been lost) and is trying to keep up a long-distance relationship through this ancient means of communication.

It seems that Paul's letter had been prompted by at least two pieces of information he had received. First, he had received reports from "Chloe's people" (1:11). From these Paul learned about some of the divisiveness within the community and the quarrels breaking out among them. And second, he had received a letter from a delegation of Corinthians (7:1). The letter must have contained queries about several issues, and from Paul's answers we can discern those topics that most demanded Paul's attention. Paul's reply, which we call today First Corinthians, is essentially his response to a wide variety of issues and problems raised by these two sources.

Because Paul's letter is a piece of correspondence, we must realize that we are reading someone else's mail. As we eavesdrop on this conversation, we should be clear that Paul did not intend to develop a timeless, theological essay. Rather, he is offering pastoral instruction for a particular community that encountered a specific set of challenges in the middle of the first century. As we read the letter, we are given a privileged glimpse of one particularly difficult moment in the life of the first generation of Christianity.

Because we are reading the mail of the Corinthians and are unaware of many details about which Paul is writing, there is much in the letter that is not obvious to us. The particular problems addressed by Paul are far away and long ago. So, we should not be surprised to find it difficult at times to follow the thread of Paul's thought. But the puzzles should not distract us from the parts that are clear. Paul addresses plenty of issues that have parallels for the church today and that give us plenty of food for thought and reflection.

Because this letter was preserved and widely circulated in the early church, it has become a part of the New Testament canon. God has chosen to offer timeless guidance to his church through this time-bound piece of correspondence. In order to discern God's truth in Paul's letter today, we must first of all step back from the text, distancing ourselves from its ancient context and far-away setting. We must understand its foreignness and confess that it does not

speak to our twenty-first-century challenges directly. But then we must draw near to the text again, projecting ourselves imaginatively into the long-ago life of Corinth and learning to see our own lives in challenging new ways. We then listen expectantly for God's timeless truth found in the overlap between then and now.

The Holy Spirit who inspired Paul as he wrote this letter continues to move in the faithful communities who continue to read it. Both Paul's preaching and his letter writing serve as vehicles of the revelation of God. Both are humble instruments used by God's Spirit to teach the church, moving those called by God beyond themselves and into the vulnerability of life lived for God and for others. This divine Spirit is the means by which the word of God comes to the church today through 1 Corinthians.

Reflection and discussion

- What are the inherent problems of understanding when reading someone else's mail?
- What transition do I need to make so that Paul's mail to the first-century Corinthians becomes God's word addressed to me?

Reading Paul's Letter to the Corinthians

Deep insight and pastoral sensitivity make this letter one of Paul's greatest achievements. The work provides testimony from the first century to the difficulties that accompanied the planting of the gospel of Jesus Christ in a pagan environment. Throughout the letter we see evidence of this nascent community struggling with its identity, character, and behavior.

Paul writes to the Corinthians from the perspective of his understanding of what God has accomplished in the world. At its heart is the truth about humanity's desperate situation and the saving work God has accomplished in Christ. This is no superficial self-help message. Paul has come "proclaiming the mystery of God" (2:1). This mystery, planned by God from eternity but hidden from the world, is now revealed by God in this time of fulfillment.

This divine purpose for the world is too profound to be discovered by human insight. It is truth that must be revealed by God because it transcends worldly wisdom. The heart of this mystery, the salvation offered to the world in Christ crucified, is particularly impenetrable to those who pride themselves on their own status and power, for it shows them to be only an illusion. This truth is revealed, rather, to the humble, to anyone who chooses to submit to it. Only by receiving God's revelation with such trust can the depths of God's grace be fully grasped.

Paul knew that he and his hearers were living in a critical time. Through the crucified Messiah, God has intervened to overthrow the present evil order of the world and usher in the fullness of God's reign. The church is living now at that crucial juncture: "the present form of this world is passing away" (7:31), and God's sovereignty has begun. God is now calling this new community, in Corinth and throughout the world, to live a transformed existence made possible through the outpouring of the Spirit and its gifts.

As Paul moves from topic to topic in this letter, he brings this understanding of what God has done in Christ to bear on his responses to the community. How should these Corinthians, poised between the saving event of Christ's cross and the promise of future glory, live in the present? Paul unfolds his answer in these chapters, a reply that remains as challenging today as it was for his first-century readers.

Reflection and discussion

- What is the unique perspective that Paul brings to his response to the pastoral issues that face the church in Corinth?

- What aspects of my own context today make me more open and eager to read this letter?

Prayer

Lord God, you called your apostle Paul to proclaim your gospel and establish your church in Corinth. Prepare my mind and heart to receive these inspired words of Paul as I read his First Letter to the Corinthians. Show me how to meditate on these words each day so that they lead me to prayer. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, stir up in me a desire to respond to these words and allow them to transform my life. Keep me faithful during these weeks to the challenges of study and prayer that your word offers to me.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FACILITATORS, GROUP SESSION 1

1. If the group is meeting for the first time, or if there are newcomers joining the group, it is helpful to provide nametags.
2. Distribute the books to the members of the group.
3. You may want to ask the participants to introduce themselves and tell the group a bit about themselves.
4. Ask one or more of these introductory questions:
 - What drew you to join this group?
 - What is your biggest fear in beginning this Bible study?
 - How is beginning this study like a “threshold” for you?

5. You may want to pray this prayer as a group:

Come upon us, Holy Spirit, to enlighten and guide us as we begin this study of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. You inspired the authors of Scripture to reveal your presence throughout the history of salvation. This inspired word has the power to convert our hearts and change our lives. Fill our hearts with desire, trust, and confidence as you shine the light of your truth within us. Motivate us to read the Scriptures, and give us a deeper love for God's word each day. Bless us during this session and throughout the coming week with the fire of your love.

6. Read the Introduction aloud, pausing at each question for discussion. Group members may wish to write the insights of the group as each question is discussed. Encourage several members of the group to respond to each question.
7. Don't feel compelled to finish the complete Introduction during the session. It is better to allow sufficient time to talk about the questions raised than to rush to the end. Group members may read any remaining sections on their own after the group meeting.
8. Instruct group members to read the first six lessons on their own during the six days before the next group meeting. They should write out their own answers to the questions as preparation for next week's group discussion.
9. Fill in the date for each group meeting under “Schedule for Group Study.”
10. Conclude by praying aloud together the prayer at the end of the Introduction.