

# I Corinthians study notes

## Summary

In response to a letter from the Corinthians making various inquiries about worship practices and ethics, as well as a personal report from "Chloe's people" (1 Corinthians 1:11) that the congregation Paul has founded has fallen to quarreling, **Paul writes to the Corinthians, directing them to approach their ethical dilemmas and resolve their interpersonal conflicts on the basis of their unity as members of the body of Christ.** The letter recasts themes apparently popular among the Corinthians, such as knowledge, wisdom, and spiritual gifts, in light of the reversal of status implied by the news of "Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).



## So What?

**First Corinthians offers a window on a congregation and preacher trying to sort out the real-life implications of the gospel.** How should Christians live in a culture at odds with their confession of faith? What commitments and practices enable Christians to honor one another in the midst of differences of opinion? The letter explores themes of Christian unity, ethics, and hope from the perspective of those upon "whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11).

## Where Do I Find It?

First Corinthians is the seventh book in the New Testament. It is the second in the collection of Paul's letters, following Romans and preceding 2 Corinthians.

## Who Wrote It?

In 1 Corinthians 1:1, the senders of the letter identify themselves as "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes." Paul is the Jew who was first a persecutor of the church and then, following an appearance of the risen Jesus to him, a fervent apostle and proclaimer of Jesus Christ as Lord of both Jews and Gentiles. Sosthenes may be the Corinthian synagogue official mentioned in Acts 18:17. He is nowhere else mentioned in the New Testament. Paul uses both the first-person singular and the first person plural in 1 Corinthians 1:1.

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### When Was It Written?

Paul likely founded the church in Corinth in the early 50s. He writes from Ephesus where "a wide door for effective work has opened" (1 Corinthians 16:9).

### What's It About?

Paul responds to reports of dissension within the Corinthian congregation by reminding his readers of their unity in Christ and their responsibility to honor one another as members of the body of Christ.



### How Do I Read It?

**First Corinthians is part of an ongoing correspondence between Paul and the church in Corinth.** We can only guess—in more or less educated ways—at what exactly happened in Corinth and what sort of relationship Paul had over time with believers there. **We read the letter much as we might listen to one side of someone else's telephone call.** That is, we are realistic about gaps in our understanding and careful in attempts to reconstruct the other half of the conversation. This level of humility is especially important when reading parts of the letter that are alien to our sensibilities or contrary to the understanding of the gospel we have as a result of engaging the whole of the biblical witness.

## Outline

### 1. Address, Greeting, and Thanksgiving (1 Corinthians 1:1-9)

Paul and his coworker Sosthenes address this letter to "the church of God that is in Corinth" (1 Corinthians 1:1-2). With its reference to the Corinthians having been enriched in every way in Christ Jesus, Paul's introductory thanksgiving hints at themes to come.

## 2. Divisions in the Church and Unity in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21)

The Corinthians have apparently divided themselves into camps supporting various apostles and claiming knowledge and strength that is superior to that of others. Paul speaks of the shared nature of apostolic ministry and undermines the Corinthians' scorekeeping attempts with the message that God's power has been made perfect in the weakness of the crucified Christ. This section has four parts:

- a. Report of divisions in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:10-17)
- b. Paul proclaims Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5)
- c. God's Spirit contrasted with the spirit of the world (1 Corinthians 2:6-16)
- d. The nature of apostles' ministry (1 Corinthians 3:1-4:21)

## 3. The Community's Role in Ensuring Individual Accountability (1 Corinthians 5:1-6:20)

Paul is mystified by the way that the Corinthians' experience of being in Christ does not seem to be bearing fruit in their individual and corporate lives. He counsels the exclusion from the community of a man who is sexually involved with his step-mother and he rebukes believers who do not turn to the community to mediate disputes, but instead take each other to court. He reminds the Corinthians that their spiritual connection to Christ has implications for their physical activities. This section has three parts:

- a. Responding to a man living with his father's wife (1 Corinthians 5:1-13)
- b. Responding to believers taking each other to court (1 Corinthians 6:1-11)
- c. Responding to reports of moral license (1 Corinthians 6:12-20)

## 4. Paul Replies to the Corinthians' Questions (1 Corinthians 7:1-11:1)

Paul replies to questions the Corinthians have put to him in a letter, offering a combination of his own wisdom and elements of Jesus' own teaching. His ethical counsel is shaped by his conviction that "the appointed time has grown short" until Christ's return (1 Corinthians 7:29) and by the conviction that believers should limit their own freedom voluntarily whenever



the exercise of that freedom may harm a brother or sister in Christ. This section has two parts:

- a. Staying "as you were" (1 Corinthians 7:1-40)
- b. Individual freedom is limited by care for others (1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1)

## **5. Paul Comments on Issues Related to Corporate Worship (1 Corinthians 11:2-14:40)**

Worship in the Corinthian church was apparently something of a free-for-all. Paul addresses several worship-related issues, urging restraint and mutual respect as values for the Corinthians' corporate worship. This section has five parts:

- a. Prophesying and respecting others (1 Corinthians 11:2-17)
- b. Sharing the Lord's Supper and respecting others (1 Corinthians 11:17-34)
- c. Respecting the variety of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:1-31)
- d. Love as the greatest (1 Corinthians 13:1-13)
- e. Guidelines for orderly worship (1 Corinthians 14:1-40)

## **6. The Resurrection of the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:1-58)**

Paul argues from the past resurrection of Christ to a future general, bodily resurrection of all the dead, declaring, "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet" (1 Corinthians 15:51-52, RSV).

We Will not all Sleep,  
but we Will all be changed.  
*1 Corinthians 15:51*

## 7. Conclusion (1 Corinthians 16:1-24)

Paul closes his letter with an appeal for the Corinthians to contribute toward a monetary gift he is collecting for the church in Jerusalem, as well as greetings to and from fellow believers. He promises an extended visit to Corinth soon. The section has three parts:

- a. The collection (1 Corinthians 16:1-4)
- b. Travel plans (1 Corinthians 16:5-12)
- c. Concluding greetings, instruction, and blessing (1 Corinthians 16:13-24)

### *Background*

Sometime in the 40s, Paul founded a church, or more likely several smaller house churches, in the port city of Corinth. **The city itself was a diversely populated urban center, and that diversity may have been mirrored in the community of Gentile believers Paul drew together.** [Reflecting the city's decadence, the term "Corinthianize" referred to immorality.]

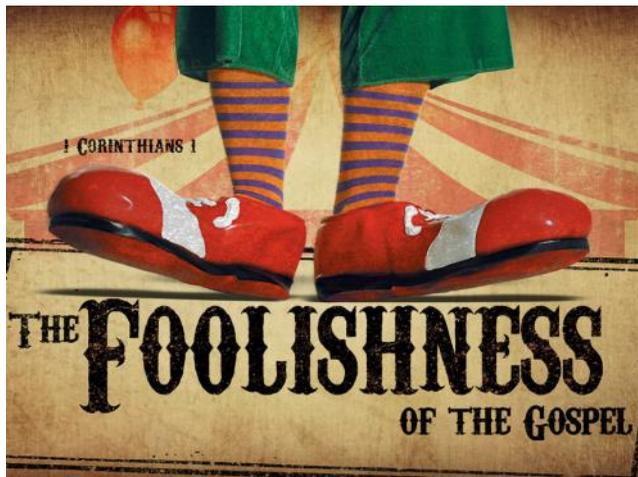
After living in Corinth for some time, Paul went on to other work. Then, in response to a letter from the Corinthians and a report from "Chloe's people" (1 Corinthians 1:11) that the church was experiencing division, Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. He was living in Ephesus at the time (see 1 Corinthians 16:8-9), and he anticipated visiting Corinth soon after the letter arrived.

The report and letter Paul received led him to conclude that the Corinthians were disagreeing with each other about the quality of leadership Paul and other apostles had offered, about the implications of their new spiritual existence for decidedly physical activities like eating and being involved in sexual relationships, about whether their experience of being in Christ made them at all responsible to other brothers and sisters in Christ, and similar issues.

### *Introductory issues*

- **Apostolic authority mediated by letter.** Paul recognizes that the effectiveness of the apostles' ministry depends on God, saying, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6). Yet he also believes that his ministry occupies a unique and honored place in the Corinthian church: "For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in

Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel" (1 Corinthians 4:15). Paul further regards his own word as authoritative for the Corinthian church even in his absence. For example, he directs the church to recognize that he is with them in spirit and to carry out a judgment he has "already pronounced" against a member of the church (1 Corinthians 5:3-5).



- **The mind of Christ.** Some of the Corinthians are taking pride in their superior knowledge. Paul turns the tables on this sense of superiority by claiming first that "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom" (1 Corinthians 1:25) and later that knowledge of "the gifts bestowed on us by God" comes from the Holy Spirit, which is itself a gift from God (1 Corinthians 2:12). In this context, Paul writes, "We have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians

2:16). Elsewhere, Paul makes it clear that the mind of Christ is the disposition of one who embodies a concern for others by practicing humility and self-giving love (see Philippians 2:1-11).

- **Opinion in Paul's letters.** Paul's teaching on divorce comes in the context of his response to questions that the Corinthians had about whether Christianity required abstinence from sex between spouses. Paul denies this and nonetheless counsels unmarried people and widows to stay unmarried. He also counsels married people to stay married. He differentiates his teaching on the subjects of divorce and ongoing marriage (1 Corinthians 7:10-13) into two categories: **advice that comes from the Lord and advice that he is giving apart from any word of the Lord on the matter. The passage demonstrates that Paul himself did not understand all of his words to have the equal authority.**
- **Paul's view of women.** Students of Paul's letters disagree about whether Paul supported women as full participants in the church and in ministry. The evidence in 1 Corinthians is mixed. On the one hand, Paul nearly always speaks to both sexes when he is speaking to one, and mutual respect between the sexes is a persistent

theme in the letter. See, for example, his directions about marriage and singleness in 1 Corinthians 7. When Paul does speak hierarchically of men and women in 1 Corinthians 11, even he seems uncomfortable with the direction his argument is going, and so he says, "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman" (1 Corinthians 11:11). On the other hand, 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 dictates that women remain silent during worship. Furthermore, when Paul reports the tradition he received about Christ's resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:3-8), he fails to mention the presence of women at the tomb though they are the first witnesses to the resurrection in every other New Testament report of the event. Was the presence of women a detail of the story Paul did not know, or did he know it and choose not to report it? We cannot say. **In any case, Paul was most likely neither an early feminist nor any more suspicious of women than we would expect any classically trained first-century Jewish Christian male to be.**

- **Pollution of the body.** Both with respect to individual bodies and with respect to the church as the body of Christ, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to guard against pollution. He argues that a Christian engaging in sexual activity with a prostitute joins the body of Christ to the body of the prostitute (1 Corinthians 6:15-18). Christians are to avoid eating meat that had been offered to idols since doing so may encourage other Christians, who still worry about the power of an idol, to take up the practice and thus defile their own consciences (1 Corinthians 8:7). He counsels women prophets to cover their heads, apparently because he believes that the angels might be drawn to the bodies of prophets in an ecstatic state (1 Corinthians 11:10). **Paul is not repelled by the human body. In fact, he will argue forcefully in this letter for the resurrection of the body, against those who would prefer the language of a soul's or spirit's immortality to a body's resurrection.** He is, however, concerned that human bodies be kept apart from polluting influences.

*"Nevertheless,  
in the Lord woman is not  
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man independent of  
woman."*

*(Does that answer my critics?)*

• **Present-day relevance of occasional letters.** All of Paul's letters were inspired by particular occasions within the shared life of first-century believers in Christ. To read the letters in the New Testament is to read someone else's mail. **Does it make sense to expect these letters to have meaning and relevance for people who are hundreds of years away from the events and the cultural norms of the communities to which these letters were first addressed?**

First Corinthians focuses this question more vividly than some of Paul's other writing since much of this letter is addressing particular questions put to Paul in a letter from the Corinthians. Reading 1 Corinthians requires us to decide how an apostle's comments on issues like whether to eat meat that had been offered to idols, or how long someone's hair should be, are authoritative, or even meaningful, for later Christian communities. Of course, such decisions have been part of reading Paul's letters since the earliest addressees copied and shared the letters beyond their own communities. Over the centuries, Christians have recognized the contingent nature of Paul's writing and nonetheless continued to read these letters to inform their life together.

• **Quotations from the Corinthians.** It is not always clear at what point Paul is quoting those who disagree with him in Corinth, and whether-when he quotes them-he is agreeing with their position or not. At several points in the letter, Paul is probably quoting either the Corinthians' letter to him or common phrases that he knows from them. These points are:

- 1 Corinthians 6:12 and 10:23 ("All things are lawful")
- 1 Corinthians 6:13 ("Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food")
- 1 Corinthians 7:1 ("It is well for a man not to touch a woman")



- 1 Corinthians 8:1 ("All of us possess knowledge")
- 1 Corinthians 8:4 ("No idol in the world really exists" and "there is no God but one")

In most of these cases, Paul agrees with an element of the saying and then qualifies the statement or draws implications from it in ways that are different from what the Corinthians have meant by it.

- **The time is short.** Much of Paul's ethical advice in 1 Corinthians 6 and 7 grows out of his conviction that the time until Christ's return to judgment is short.

He counsels married and unmarried people to maintain their current status. He also counsels slaves not to work to earn their freedom, though they may "make the most of the opportunity" for freedom if it presents itself (1 Corinthians 7:21, NET translation). In Paul's view, "the present form of this world is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:31), and a new form is emerging in which social institutions like marriage and slavery

will not have any meaning in human life. Given that Christians continue to await the return of Christ to judgment, the premise of Paul's argument at this point in the letter turned out not to be true, at least not as he expected.



### *Theological themes*

- **The body.** Some Corinthians thought that the body was of no consequence since they were spiritually joined to Christ. In their spiritual state, the state and possible pollution of the body was no longer a concern: they could eat meat that had been offered to idols (see 1 Corinthians 8-10), engage in sex with prostitutes (see 1 Corinthians 6:12-20), or eschew sex altogether (see 1 Corinthians 7:1).

Paul does not concede any dichotomy between body and spirit. In fact, he uses the spiritual connection believers have to Christ as a reason to urge his readers to shun fornication and instead, "glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:20). Furthermore, he argues for a general resurrection of the dead that will result in imperishable bodies being raised up to new life in Christ. Paul nowhere disparages the human body in favor of a disembodied spirituality, and he urges the Corinthians not to do so either.

- **Body of Christ.** Many of the issues dealt with in 1 Corinthians concern physical human bodies (for example, sexual relationships, prophesying with one's head covered or uncovered, eating or going hungry at the Lord's Supper, and the bodily resurrection of the dead). **Paul's way of addressing all of these issues is to move from a focus on individual human bodies to the implications of each person's actions for the corporate body of believers.** He identifies those to whom he writes as the body of Christ, and writes, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12).



ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑ

koinōnia

communion and fellowship  
and sharing!

- **Christian community.** The Corinthians had many ways of distinguishing themselves from one another and ranking themselves over against each other. Knowledge, wisdom, strength, spiritual gifts, loyalty to particular leaders: the people to whom Paul wrote had converted all of these

things into means by which they sought status for themselves and assigned status to others. **The letter of 1 Corinthians is a sustained argument against such attempts at ranking one another.** The letter offers a vision of Christian community at the center of which is the Spirit embodied by Christ, the crucified one. This community is characterized by God's choice of "what is low and despised in the world" (1 Corinthians 1:28) and by love that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7).

- **Day of the Lord.** Along with many other Jews of his time, Paul believed that God was on the verge of a cosmic intervention by which all would be judged and the righteous would be saved from God's wrath. The general resurrection of the dead had long been thought to be a feature of such a Day of the Lord, and Paul concluded that Christ's resurrection signaled that the Day of the Lord was near. In several of his letters, Paul speaks of an imminent day of divine judgment, and three times in 1 Corinthians (1:8, 3:13, and 5:5), he refers to the approaching "day" or "day of the Lord." At one point, Paul refers to himself and the Corinthians as those upon "whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). **Because of his conviction that Christ is about to return, Paul's words to the Corinthians have both an urgency and an interim quality about them.**

- **Former life contrasted with the new.** Paul's ethical advice gives evidence that he believes a fundamental change has occurred for the Corinthians. They have been washed, sanctified, and justified (see 1 Corinthians 6:11), and because of this, their relationships to one another have been reconfigured. **One of the things that seems most puzzling to Paul in this letter is the reality that the Corinthians' behavior looks so much like the behavior they exhibited before they were united with Christ.** Paul contrasts their former way of life, characterized by various actions of self-aggrandizement, with a new way of honoring one another in community that characterizes (or should characterize) those in Christ.



- **Love.** The Corinthians had placed high value on knowledge and on spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues and prophesying. In 1 Corinthians, Paul urges the Corinthians to strive for love over all other things. As he describes love, it is more concerned with the other than with oneself.
- **Orderly worship.** Much of 1 Corinthians (see chapters 11 through 14) is Paul's advice about how the Corinthians should conduct their public worship services. He gives advice on the Lord's Supper, urging people to wait for one another and to share the elements of bread and wine equitably with one another. He also advises the community not to indulge in practices such as the uninterpreted speaking in tongues because these practices are unintelligible to outsiders. He concludes his advice on this topic with the words, "So, my friends, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:39-40).



The beloved former Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, with his unmistakable call for "Order."

- **The resurrection.** In 1 Corinthians 15, **Paul reasons from the resurrection of Christ to a general resurrection of the dead.** Some in Corinth doubt that bodies will be raised. Paul acknowledges that the physical body decays but is unswerving in his conviction that "the dead will be raised imperishable" (1 Corinthians 15:52) and that whatever the resurrection involves, it will feature a "spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:44) for those raised.

- **Spiritual gifts.** The Corinthians apparently take pride in external manifestations of their spiritual relationship with Christ. Prophesying, speaking in tongues, and interpreting tongues are all part of their worship. Meanwhile, something as mundane as making sure everyone gets something to eat at the Lord's Supper is left undone. Much of 1 Corinthians is given over to Paul's attempt to convince the Corinthians that spiritual gifts are not instruments for demonstrating superiority over one's brothers and sisters in Christ. Instead, acting from the spiritual reality of being in Christ means acting with love, care, and mutual regard for other members of the body of Christ.



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# Outline of 1 Corinthians

- 1. Salutation and thanksgiving (1:1-9)**
- 2. Divisions in the church and unity in Christ (1:10-4:21)**
  - a. Divisions are reported (1:10-17)
  - b. Proclamation of Christ crucified (1:18-2:5)
  - c. True and false wisdom (2:6-16)
  - d. Dissensions over leaders (3-4)
- 3. Individual accountability (5-6)**
  - a. Incest (5)
  - b. Lawsuits in civil courts (6:1-8)
  - c. Sexual immorality (6:9-20)
- 4. Paul replies to questions from the church (7-11:1)**
  - a. Marriage and divorce (7)
  - b. Food offered to idols (8)
  - c. His rights as an apostle (9)
  - d. No compromise with idolatry (10-11:1)
- 5. Order in public worship (11:2-14:40)**
  - a. Women's dress in worship (11:2-16)
  - b. The Lord's Supper (11:17-34)
  - c. Variety of spiritual gifts (12)
  - d. Love directs use of spiritual gifts (13)
  - e. Regulating spiritual gifts (14)
- 6. Resurrection of the dead (15)**
- 7. Conclusion (16)**

## Outline of 2 Corinthians

1. Salutation and thanksgiving (1:1-11)
2. Paul's ministry and crisis in Corinth (1:12-7:16)
  - a. His change of plans (1:12-2:11)
  - b. He describes his ministry (2:12-6:10)
  - c. He makes an appeal (6:11-7:16)
3. Collection for the church in Jerusalem (8-9)
4. Paul's self-defense (10-13:10)
  - a. True apostleship (10)
  - b. Reply to super-apostles (11:1-15)
  - c. His boasting (11:16-12:13)
  - d. His plan to revisit Corinth (12:14-13:10)
5. Conclusion (13:11-13)

