

Unit 1 Introduction

Understanding 1 Corinthians

Initial Issues

While total agreement on any issue is unusual, Paul's authorship of 1 and 2 Corinthians is unquestioned by biblical scholars. According to his traveling companion Luke (Acts 17:1—18:17), after the establishment of churches at Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroea in northern Greece, Paul briefly visits Athens before traveling on to Corinth. Here Paul joins with Aquila and Priscilla, a husband and wife who had come to Corinth after the Roman emperor Claudius' expulsion of Jews from Rome.

Acts 18:4 indicates that every Sabbath Paul "reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks" concerning Jesus as the Christ. Paul's message is not well-received, and his ministry shifts focus to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, and others in the broader Gentile community. Paul remains in Corinth approximately one and a half years from AD 50-52. He then travels to Ephesus and from here writes 1 Corinthians around AD 53-54, after receiving news from the house of Chloe that there are quarrels in the church (1:11). This is not his first letter to this community as indicated by his words: "I have written you in my letter . . ." (5:9).

As a cosmopolitan city, Corinth was famous, or perhaps infamous, in the ancient Mediterranean world. It was known for its prosperity, trade, materialism, and association with Aphrodite, the supreme goddess of love and fertility. With reference to Corinth, the term "corinthianize," meaning to live a promiscuous life, was coined. Using more current terminology, Corinth was known as "Sin City."

While the city was renowned for its luxury and moral corruption, it was also known for its philosophical and literary culture. A phrase "Corinthian words," was developed with reference to eloquent speech associated with the city. Corinth well represents the cultural and religious diversity of the Greco-Roman world.

Differing Perspectives

Scholars have noted that two groups of Christians appear to be addressed in 1 Corinthians: libertines and ascetics. Both groups affirmed Paul's teaching that salvation comes by the grace of God through faith and not by works. Differences arose, however, over how this translates into the life in Christ.

The perspective of the libertines is reflected by their slogan "I have the right to do anything," referenced by Paul in 10:23. Since justification with God comes through faith apart from works, then indulgence of the senses is acceptable. Whatever one does with one's body does not matter since salvation is solely a spiritual matter.

The ascetics accepted that salvation is a spiritual matter, but this

observation leads to an opposite conclusion. Since one's body is not important concerning spiritual matters, then the desires of the body should be subdued. This resulted in the group's questioning of Paul concerning the appropriateness of Christian marriage (7:1-7). Awareness of these two perspectives, which shared a common understanding concerning the means of salvation, serves as a background for Paul's letter to this church.

Challenges at Corinth—An Overview

In corresponding with the church in Corinth, Paul uses a common Hellenistic, or Greek, format for letter writing involving a salutation or initial greeting (1:1-3), words of thanksgiving (1:4-9), body (1:10-16:18), and conclusion (16:19-24). In the body of his letter, the central issues of 1 Corinthians are revealed.

In chapters 1:10—4:21, Paul begins his treatment of issues in the church with the problem of disunity. Receiving information from the house of Chloe, Paul learns that parties were being formed with allegiances to various early Christian leaders such as Paul, Apollos, and Cephas or Peter (1:10-13). It appears certain leaders were being given the "corner on the market" about how the Christian faith was to be understood and embodied. Today, this practice might be compared to giving unquestioned allegiance to a particular religious or political leader.

In response, Paul puts all human wisdom into proper perspective. In 1:20, he questions: "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" Paul argues that no human is the sole owner and interpreter of truth. Unity in the church ultimately comes from a focus on Christ alone. Leaders in the church are merely servants for carrying out God's work (3:5-9).

In chapters 5—6, Paul abruptly transitions to another topic of concern for the church at Corinth, namely sexual immorality. He responds negatively to news that a man is living with his stepmother as his wife (5:1). Surprising, rather than being sad over this behavior, the church is proud of its occurrence. Such behavior did not even meet the moral standards of Greco-Roman society.

Following an admonition against lawsuits among believers (6:1-11), Paul references the slogan "I have the right to do anything" (6:12) embraced by members of the church for whom having sexual relations with a prostitute was appropriate. Paul argues that such conduct that was an accepted part of their cultural background has no place in the Christian life. Paul references the believer's body as a temple of the Holy Spirit, declaring, "You are not your own, you were

bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (19b-20).

In chapter 7, Paul discusses Christian marriage in response to another slogan, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman," (7:1) reported to him in a previous letter from Corinth. While preferring the single life for himself, likely due to the early Christian belief that the return of Christ was imminent and all life should have this focus, Paul affirms marriage and the lasting nature of this bond as intended by Christ (7:10-11). Then speaking out of his own understanding, Paul recognizes that at times this ideal may not be possible due to the actions of the unbelieving spouse (7:15).

In chapter 8—11:1, Christians are presented as being part of a larger whole and responsible for one another. They are not isolated individuals who are free to do whatever they wish. Consideration must always be given to how one's actions will affect others, particularly in a harmful way.

Before coming to Christ, the cultural understanding of believers was that eating meat that had been previously offered to idols was a way of participation in the worship of that given deity. While in agreement with the knowledgeable and enlightened Christians that eating such meat was of no consequence, Paul warns against the exercise of personal freedom in this matter if "this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge" (8:11). The supremacy of love over knowledge is maintained.

Surrendering one's rights for the welfare of others is carried over into chapter 9 where Paul presents himself as an example in his ministry for Christ. In chapter 10, Paul draws on imagery from the Exodus and Israel's wilderness experience concerning the dangers of idolatry. In conclusion to the dietary issue at hand, Paul again cites the slogan, "I have the right to do anything." He writes: "'I have the right to do anything,' you say—but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything'—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others" (10:23-24).

In 11:2—14:40, Paul addresses additional questions about worship in the church (11:2-16), observance of the Lord's Supper (11:17-33), and the use of spiritual gifts (12:1—14:40).

In 11:2-16, Paul's words about women's head coverings in the church have been recognized as culturally bound. Such is not the case, however, with his assumption of women's active participation in worship in terms of prayer and prophesying or preaching (11:5). Here Paul moves beyond the parameters of Jewish synagogue worship where women had no active role. Jesus had already begun the transformation of understanding concerning women in society as evidenced in their significant participation in his earthly ministry, particularly stressed in the gospel of Luke (8:1-3).

In 11:17-34, Paul responds to disunity which arose when the Corinthian church gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper, which took place in the setting of a shared meal. Following the common practice of gathering in private homes for this event, wealthier Christians were coming early and consuming the food and beverage before poorer members could arrive, thus treating them as second-class citizens and negating the significance of this time together. For Paul, all Christians are equal before the Lord, and this equality should be reflected in the practices of the church.

In 12—14, Paul discusses spiritual or special gifts prized by the Corinthians such as wisdom, healing, and knowledge which were given by God to individual members of the church for the benefit of all. In this context (ch. 13), he presents a hymn to love (agape), stressing the gifts' application to life and that without love, they are meaningless. Spiritual gifts are incomplete reflections of divine reality and will no longer be needed in the world to come with only faith, hope, and love remaining.

In chapter 15, Paul concludes the body of his letter by discussing the resurrection of the dead associated with the second coming of Christ. Due to their cultural background, some Corinthians were questioning the necessity of a future bodily resurrection due to their misconception that upon baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit, they had already achieved eternal life. As a result, any future existence was solely spiritual with the physical body being of no concern. This belief was in accord with Greek thought where the body is the prison-house of the soul, and salvation is associated with deliverance from its limitations.

In response, Paul reminds the Corinthians of Jesus' resurrection. If there is no resurrection, then Christ has not been raised from the dead, and if this is so, then all our faith is in vain, and we remain in our sins. Those who have died in Christ have perished. In the remainder of chapter 15, Paul discusses the mystery of the perishable putting on the imperishable. The Christian hope for the future always involves a new body, a concept in tune with Jewish hopes for the future.

In chapter 16, Paul concludes with reference to a collection for the poor of Jerusalem, a travel itinerary, and a standard closing with greetings and a benediction. With authenticity, Paul has provided a glimpse into the many challenges of life and ministry within the community at Corinth which has implications for our lives together in the church today.

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