

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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1 Corinthians

In this fascinating letter to a multiethnic church, we see some of the everyday problems the early Christians were dealing with. In Paul's advice on how to handle these problems, we find deep principles that shape his thinking about practical Christian living. These enduring principles—so different from the popular trends of Paul's time or ours—provide rich guidance for us as we deal with similar problems today.

Setting

Corinth's widespread reputation as an important city full of vice was linked to its geography. The city was strategically located on the narrow four- to five-mile-wide isthmus separating mainland Greece from the Peloponnesus (the large southern peninsula). It profited from travelers passing north and south along the main overland route and from those sailing east and west between the Gulf of Corinth and the Saronic Gulf. To avoid the stormy hazards of the Mediterranean Sea, especially in wintertime, the owners of small commercial boats sailing between Italy and the eastern Mediterranean often had their boats dragged over the isthmus from one gulf to the other and spent a night or two in Corinth on the way. As a result, Corinth gained the notoriety of a port city and was widely known for prostitution and other vices. There was even a verb in Greek (*korinthiazomai*, “to act like a Corinthian”) that referred to sexual immorality. It’s not surprising that some of these problems made their way into the young church (see Paul’s strong words about sexual immorality in [5:1–13](#); [6:12–20](#)).

Old Corinth was conquered and destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC. It was rebuilt a century later as a Roman colony and populated in large part by former Roman slaves. By the time of Paul’s visit, it was a cosmopolitan city, with Romans, Greeks, Jews, and other ethnic groups from all over the Mediterranean, as well as international visitors passing through the city. As a result, the members of the young church were multiethnic, which was likely a factor in the tensions it experienced (see Paul’s rebuke of their cliquishness in [1:10–12](#); [3:1–4](#)).

Paul first arrived in the city during his second missionary trip (around AD 50), after his work in the northern province of Macedonia and in Athens. Realizing that the city was strategic to his evangelistic efforts, he stayed in Corinth for eighteen months (AD 50–52; see [Acts 18:1–17](#)). When the Jews took him to court for breaking the law, the governor Gallio threw the case out because it was a religious dispute. Given the freedom to evangelize, Paul made a number of converts and began a church there before he left.

Over the next five years, Paul corresponded with the Corinthians several times on difficult issues and even visited them personally to sort out some of their problems. The present letter, written during

the period AD 53–56, was sent from Ephesus, in the province of Asia (western Turkey), where Paul spent two to three years on his third missionary journey.

Summary

Paul deals with a wide range of problems and questions facing the young church—some of which reflect the problems of the city itself—and he gives specific advice on dealing with them. Paul's advice reflects the fundamental principles underlying his view of the Christian life, principles rooted in the Good News itself. Paul addressed the following issues:

- Criticism of Paul's non-intellectual approach to evangelism ([1:1-4:21](#))
- A flagrant case of sexual immorality in the church ([5:1-13](#))
- The practice of taking fellow believers to court before pagan judges ([6:1-20](#))
- Problems of sexual immorality ([6:1-20](#))
- Questions about marriage, divorce, and staying single ([7:1-40](#))
- The question of whether believers are allowed to eat meat sacrificed to pagan idols ([8:1-10:33](#))
- The question of appropriate dress for women who minister publicly ([11:1-34](#))
- Irreverent and disrespectful behavior in receiving the Lord's Supper ([11:1-34](#))
- Distorted perspectives on spiritual gifts and their practice ([12:1-14:40](#))
- Skepticism about a future resurrection of the dead ([15:1-58](#))

Authorship

Paul is widely accepted as the writer of 1 Corinthians. Some, however, question the authenticity of [14:34–35](#) (see study note there). In line with common practice of the ancient world, Paul used an amanuensis (secretary) to do the actual writing of the letter (see [16:21](#)).

Date and Occasion of Writing

This letter to the Corinthian church was written on Paul's third missionary journey, during his two- to three-year stay in Ephesus (around AD 53–56; see [Acts 19:1–41](#)). Paul had written a previous letter to the church in Corinth (see [1 Cor 5:9](#)), and the Corinthians had replied, asking his advice on a number of points (see, e.g., [7:1](#)). He had also received reports and visitors from Corinth (see [1:11](#); [16:15–17](#)), making him aware of a number of problems facing the young church. This letter, full of advice on specific issues, is his response. It may have been delivered by Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (see [16:15–17](#)) when they returned to Corinth.

Some problems apparently remained unresolved, resulting in a later personal visit to Corinth and a strongly worded letter that we do not have. Paul refers to these in the emotionally laden letter we know as 2 Corinthians, written from Macedonia shortly after he left Ephesus, in anticipation of yet another visit to the church (see [2 Cor 2:1–11](#); [7:8–10](#); 2 Corinthians Book Introduction, "Date and Occasion of Writing").

Meaning and Message

In 1 Corinthians, we catch a fascinating glimpse of what life was like in the early church. We see some of the practical problems the early Christians faced as they lived in a pagan environment and how they dealt with them.

Motivation for Christian Behavior. Paul deals with problems in the churches from a thoroughly Christian point of view, rooted in the Good News of God's grace. In his thinking, Christian behavior is firmly grounded in Christian theology, in the message of Christ and the cross. The advice he gives on Christian living is not simply pragmatic, but solidly based on the relationship of believers to Christ. His own practical life has been revolutionized by his experience of God's grace in Christ.

So, for example, when Paul addresses issues of sexual morality ([5:1-6:20](#)), he reminds the church that believers have been made new by the sacrifice of Christ and that they should live accordingly. His appeal for faithfulness is not that they should keep the law of Moses, but that they should understand what it means to be united to Christ and to be the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit ([6:15-20](#)).

When Paul discourages believers from taking one another to pagan law courts ([6:1-8](#)), he is in part concerned for the effect on their witness as Christians. He urges them to give up their rights out of love for others, as Christ did. The death of Christ has taught him that Christian love is sacrificial.

When Paul gives advice on marriage ([7:1-40](#)), he encourages those who are unmarried in that context to remain single so they can give themselves more fully to Christ's service. Christians are claimed by Christ and can no longer live only for themselves.

When he addresses the freedom of believers to eat meat sacrificed to pagan idols ([8:1-13; 10:1-11:1](#)), he avoids formulating rules, asserting their liberty in Christ to eat anything. He emphasizes, however, that the effect of one's actions on others is always more important than one's own rights, so believers should readily abstain from actions that would be detrimental to others. Like Christ, they are to be governed by sacrificial love in all their relationships.

In Paul's thinking, Christian behavior is a response of gratitude to the mercy and grace of God, shown

in Christ and expressed in the Good News. The whole of the believer's life is to express devotion to God and love for others (see [10:31-33](#)). This is Paul's equivalent to Jesus' two great love commands ([Matt 22:36-40; Luke 10:25-37](#)). In this letter, we see more clearly than elsewhere how Paul applies these enduring principles to a wide range of practical problems.

Paul's Understanding of Evangelism. When Paul is criticized for his rather unpolished, non-intellectual approach to evangelism ([1 Cor 1:1-4:21](#)), he emphasizes that only God can change a person's heart. The real power does not lie in the persuasive powers of human intellect and rhetoric, but in the message of God's grace and in the power of God's Spirit to renew and transform. Conversion is not a matter of one person changing another person's mind, but of God changing a person's heart.

Unity and Love in the Church. Unity among believers is an important theme throughout this letter, as a number of the issues Paul deals with have apparently divided the church (see [1:10-4:21](#), cliques in the church; [6:1-12](#), lawsuits against fellow Christians; [8:1-11:1](#), different opinions on food sacrificed to idols; [11:2-16](#), different opinions on appropriate dress for women ministering publicly; [11:17-34](#), problems in taking the Lord's Supper). Bound together as fellow members of Christ's body by a common commitment to Christ as Lord and by the shared experience of God's Spirit, believers are to live together in unity. This letter, which includes Paul's classic chapter on Christian love (ch [13](#)), highlights the importance of relating to other believers in sacrificial love, the kind of love shown by Christ himself.

Marriage, Divorce, and the Single Life. Paul has a high view of marriage and strongly opposes divorce. In light of the difficult environment for Christians in the first century and his view of the imminent return of Christ (see [7:25-31](#)), Paul encourages those who are single to remain so, seeing singleness as an opportunity to give full devotion to Christ's work in the world (see [7:32-35](#)). The two ways of living (married and celibate) are not ends in themselves, but alternate ways of participating in the more important purpose of serving Christ.

The Lord's Supper. This letter sheds significant light on early Christian understanding and practice of the Lord's Supper, offering the only extended treatment in the New Testament (chs [10-11](#)).

The Church As a Body. Paul understands the church as a dynamic, Spirit-led body made up of different parts, each with its own unique work to do (chs [12](#), [14](#)). In these early days of the Christian movement, there is no distinction between clergy and laity, but the different roles create a complementary ministry of the Spirit's gifts when Christians gather. Each person has a part to play in building up the body, and individuals are dependent on the Spirit to empower and guide them in their ministries.

The Resurrection. Among the New Testament writings, this letter gives us the most complete discussion of resurrection (ch [15](#)), including the fullest account of those who saw the resurrected Jesus, the rationale for a future resurrection, and the nature of resurrection bodies.