

# 1 CORINTHIANS

**Date of composition:** Late A.D. 56 or early 57, written from Ephesus.

Corinth was known as “the light of all Greece”—a bustling commercial center for bronze and terra-cotta. Its population included Roman officials and businessmen, merchants, soldiers and sailors from all parts of the Roman Empire. Every two years the Isthmian Games were held in Corinth, games second in importance only to the Olympic Games held every four years. Note: Travelers passing through Corinth for the games would need tents for temporary housing, so tent makers such as Paul (and his friends Aquila and Priscilla) were much in demand.

Given its wealth and the transitory nature of its sea-faring community, Corinth also had a reputation for debauchery. Indeed, Corinth’s many temples to the gods are a serious problem for the new converts to Christianity, many of whom remain enamored with the “temple culture,” which includes prostitution.

In the year 51, Paul is in Ephesus (Acts 18:18) when he hears of problems back in Corinth (1:11). The Christians are dividing themselves into four groups: “**I belong to Paul,**’ or ‘**I belong to Apollos,**’ or ‘**I belong to Cephas,**” or ‘**I belong to Christ**” (1:12). This is happening because unlike the Apollos whose eloquence attracted many followers, Paul has been careful not to indulge the Corinthians’ love of philosophy (“**When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words of wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.**” 2:1-2). It also doesn’t help matters that Paul is still working with his hands, leading some Corinthians to question the genuine apostleship of one who is also a tentmaker.

But the overarching issue is the Corinthians’ view of themselves as “people of the spirit” (14:37). That is, they believe that their gift of tongues (*glossolalia*, speechlike sounds) and wisdom (*gnosis*) are evidence that they have already assumed a kind of heightened spirituality.

## Chapter 1

In essence the Corinthians think they can supplement Christianity with human wisdom. But the Cross stands as an absolute, uncompromising contradiction to merely human wisdom. Paul writes, “**Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world**” (20)? As had been foretold by the prophets (Isaiah 29:14; Jeremiah 9:23), God has set human self-sufficiency subordinate to faith in Christ. As such, no human could have conceived God’s plan for redemption. Still, Paul’s Corinthian opponents want “higher” things of the Spirit. But Paul intends to show them that the ground is level at the foot of the Cross; and that no one can claim an advantage over anyone else before the living God.

## Chapter 2

Since the Corinthians prize wisdom above all else, they revel in the art of public speaking. But Paul reminds them that real power does not lie in any single Apostle or evangelist but in the work of the Spirit; and that the purpose of the Spirit’s coming is not to transport one *above* the present age, but to empower one to live within it (5). This is why Paul comes down so hard on the Corinthians. As the newly baptized, they *have* the Spirit; they are part of the new era that God has begun. But their present conduct and stance towards wisdom betrays them.



### Chapter 3

Paul regularly uses the imagery of children or “**babes in Christ**” (1) to reflect the Corinthians’ immature thinking and behavior. They have abandoned the gospel for something that may look like “**solid food**” (2) but is without real value.

Another issue is the nature of the Church and its leadership, especially the role of the Church’s teachers. Apostles are only servants. Paul reminds them that there cannot be “**any foundation other than the one already laid down, which is Jesus Christ**” (11). Then Paul lists six building materials, “**gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw**” which can either endure fire or be consumed (12). Precious metal and gems represent the gospel; what will perish is mere human wisdom.

Furthermore Paul wants the Corinthians to see the nature and significance of their being “**God’s temple**” (17), and at the same time sternly warns them not to destroy the Church by their divisions. Of course the Corinthians will understand the imagery of the Church as a temple; in fact, some of them continue to argue for the right to continue to visit pagan temples (chapters 8-10)!

### Chapter 4

Paul is addressing those who reject both his teaching and his authority. On the one hand, Paul is asserting his apostolic authority to preach the gospel. On the other hand, he must avoid sounding “autocratic” and thus blunt the force of his argument; for the apostles are also “**servants of Christ**” (1).

With regard to the Jesus’ Resurrection, for Paul this truth is not simply a matter of creed; it is the singular reality that radicalizes his entire existence. All merely human judgments are nothing in light of the final Judgment; all merely human values are already judged and are now reversed by Christ.

Continuing, Paul addresses the Corinthians’ pride which has allowed the gifts of the Spirit to become for them a sign of status. Instead of being grateful for these gifts, the Corinthians see them as their own; and they look down on Paul whom they consider bereft of such gifts.

To counter this attitude Paul recalls the Roman practice in which a conquering general stages a splendid parade that includes not only his armies but, at the very end of the procession, those captives who are condemned to die in the arena: “. . . **it seems to me that God has appointed us the apostles to be last, as those condemned to die**” (9).

### Chapter 5

A terrible sin—incest—must be confronted. That a believer is living in an incestuous relationship is bad enough, but worse is the Corinthians’ relaxed attitude toward it; for this is a culture for which Judeo-Christian moral restrictions on human sexuality are not easily absorbed by pagan converts. Paul is especially upset because this form of *porneia* (illicit sexual activity) is not even tolerated among the pagans.

“**And you are arrogant**” (2)! Pride has blinded the Corinthians’ to this sinner’s true state. The man should have been “**removed from among you**” (2). They are to get rid of the “old leaven,” the incestuous man, so that they might become what they are: the holy people of God in Corinth. The problem for the Corinthians is that they do not take this matter seriously—neither the sin itself nor the dangers of being thoroughly contaminated by it.

### Chapter 6

Paul applies his direct approach to when one member has a grievance against another. To redress his grievances the first man takes the second man before the civil magistrates at the judgment seat, which was in the center of the marketplace (6:1; Acts 18:12-17). Paul is astounded; not only does this action give lie to their being the holy people of God, but it is done in the presence of unbelievers—the very people the Church is trying to convert!

Finally, Paul says that our bodies do not belong to us alone; rather they belong to Christ who purchased them through the Redemption and where now the Spirit dwells in the souls of the baptized. Furthermore, Paul does not want the Corinthians to assume that their freedom from laws restricting certain foods applies also to illicit sexual relations. Christians are to honor the Lord also in the body.

## Chapter 7

Another error in the Corinthians' thinking concerns marital relations, which may be characterized as, *"Since you (Paul) are unmarried and are not actively seeking marriage, and since you have denounced porneia in your letter to us, is it not better to avoid sexual relations entirely? After all, in the new age which we have now entered by the Spirit, there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage."*

While Paul admits that not all can be celibate, those who are married should afford full conjugal rights to each other. Regarding divorce, just as couples may not refuse sexual relations within marriage, so they may not dissolve their marriages through divorce.

Regarding mixed marriages, they are to stay as they are. The believer may not initiate divorce but should maintain the marriage in the hope of the unbelieving spouse's conversion (12-13). However God calls us to peace. If the unbeliever chooses to leave, then the believer is not bound to maintain that marriage (15, the Pauline Privilege).

Regarding virgins, they may remain as they are. If the present crisis (impending persecution or Second Coming) make celibacy preferable, it does not make marriage wrong. Rather, the married in particular must learn to live as people in a world that is passing away.

## Chapters 8

The Corinthians object to Paul's earlier prohibition of food sacrificed to idols. The problem is that much of the food sold and eaten in the marketplace has been previously offered in sacrifice to pagan gods. The Corinthians hold that in the name of "knowledge" and freedom," they may eat such food (7-13). Some even go so far as to attend the cultic meals in the temple precincts (8:10; 10:14-22). They may do so, Paul says, but not if someone at the meal objects, and then Paul would have them refrain. At the same time Paul encourages the scrupulous to take a broader view. Still, Paul forbids attendance in the temples; for at such meals the gods are thought to be present.

Again, the Corinthians object. They know that idols do not exist, so it should not matter if they attend these temple meals. The problem is that such meals are intensely social affairs, where every kind of occasion is celebrated. Paul says their attendance gives scandal to their fellow Christians. Knowledge that idols do not exist can serve, but knowledge must always lead to love.

## Chapter 9

Paul defends himself against those who would deny him their material support (4-14). With every kind of available argument he contends that, **"If others share this rightful claim upon you, do not we still more"** (12)?

## Chapter 10

Again, Paul insists that attendance at pagan temples is utterly incompatible with the Christian life (14-22). Paul relates that while the Old Testament Jews had their own form of "baptism" (passing through the Red Sea) and the "Lord's supper" (manna from heaven), which prefigured the New Testament sacraments, God was still displeased with their infidelity. The problem for the Corinthians is that they think that they are somehow prevented from falling out of God's favor. The Corinthians must not put God to the test, as if to dare God to judge them who have been baptized into Christ.

Concerning the Eucharist, Paul begins with **"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ"** (16)? The cup of blessing is distinguished from all others, especially from the cup of demons (21). Paul's point is that since the Corinthians are joined together in

Christ through his blood, it is impossible for them to join in pagan meals where the god invoked is a demon. Similarly Paul interprets “**the bread that we break**” in terms of the Church as Christ’s “body,” the redeemed community in Christ that forbids all other such unions.

### Chapters 11, 12, 13

In this new Christian era, women participate in worship along with men; but some women are seeking the right to do so without wearing the customary head covering. Paul is concerned that they are disregarding the customary distinctions between men and women.

Paul is especially concerned about the abuse of the Eucharistic celebration. The difficulty is that meals are part of pagan worship, and the Lord’s Supper is most likely celebrated in conjunction with such a meal. Paul reminds them of the actual words of institution consecrating the bread and wine, so that they may understand the correct meaning of food and its place within the Eucharistic celebration.

Another difficulty is that the dining area (*triclinium*) does not accommodate many guests, so the majority eat in the atrium or courtyard, which seats only about thirty to fifty guests. And in a class conscious society, it is natural for the host to invite those of one’s own class to eat together to the exclusion of others. But Paul will not let them bring such distinctions to the common meal of believers, where Christ has made them all one (10:17). For the Church cannot permit the old distinctions between slave and free, Jew and Greek, male and female to continue. The solution? Let him who is hungry eat at home before joining the Eucharistic celebration (34).

Turning back to the sublime or the “**more excellent way**” of love (12:31), Paul says that the divisiveness of the Corinthians is destructive to the church as a community. Rather they must build up the church through love. Indeed, love never comes to an end; it always remains. Love is the greatest because it alone continues into the final glory of Heaven.

### Chapter 14

Paul now offers specific correctives to the Corinthians’ unbridled expression of tongues in the gatherings for worship. Paul insists that no matter how “spiritual” a person is, he or she must be motivated by love for the building up of the community. Thus Paul insists on the *intelligibility* of speaking in tongues, so that all might hear the word of the Lord and be converted.

### Chapter 15

“**. . . how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead**” (12)? Paul is asking how can the Corinthians who believe in Jesus raised from the dead deny the bodily resurrection of believers? If Christ is not raised, then everything is false and they are not Christians. They must know that many saw Jesus alive at various locations, and that there are still living eyewitnesses who can testify to this.

Regarding how the dead are raised, Paul explains that the dead are raised with a body that is under the domination of, and animated by, the Spirit. But the Corinthians object to a bodily resurrection because they believe they have already begun a form of angelic existence; an existence in which life in the Spirit means a final shedding of the body. Some of them even go so far as to be baptized in the name of a unbaptized deceased loved one, believing that the dead might share in the final resurrection.

### Chapter 16

Finally, Paul speaks about his own travel plans and the importance of setting money aside for contributions. Then Paul admonishes one more time his Corinthian opponents: “**If anyone has not love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come**” (22)!

Paul’s letter began with “Grace to you” and concludes in the same way. Grace is the beginning and the end of the Christian gospel; it is the single word that most fully expresses what God has done and will do for us in Christ Jesus; nothing is deserved, everything is freely given.