1 Corinthians

WHAT'S THIS BOOK ABOUT? Paul writes to a good but problematic church that needs help on half a dozen issues.

WHO WROTE IT? The apostle Paul.

WHEN DID IT HAPPEN? Around A.D. 55.

WHERE DOES THIS BOOK FIT? Paul wrote 1 Corinthians near the end of his three-year stay in Ephesus.

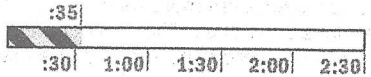
THE BREAKDOWN

- Chapters 1–4: Divisions in the church
- Chapters 5–6: Avoiding immorality and lawsuits
- Chapter 7: Questions about marriage
- Chapters 8–10: Freedom and responsibility
- Chapter 11: Worship and Communion
- Chapters 12–14: Spiritual gifts and the special place of love
- Chapter 15: The Resurrection
- Chapter 16: Personal notes

KEY CONCEPTS

- Division
- Unity
- Freedom
- Purity
- Order
- Rights
- Gifts
- Love

READING TIME



WORTH MEMORIZING

- **6:18-20** Run from sexual sin! No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality is a sin against your own body. Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.
- **10:13** The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.
- **13:4-7** Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

THE MASCULINE PERSPECTIVE

- **HEEDING CLEAR TEACHING.** Paul gives clear, no-nonsense teaching about sexual immorality (6:12-20) and marriage (chapter 7). He uses athletic examples in 9:24-27. He also steers us through the difficult tension between our freedom and rights on the one hand and our responsibility for other people on the other.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF 1 Corinthians?

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Sex, money, and power—they all must yield to God's control.

THE FIRST EPISTLE OF PAUL THE APOSTLE TO THE

CORINTHIANS

CORINTH, THE MOST IMPORTANT CITY in Greece during Paul's day, was a bustling hub of worldwide commerce, degraded culture, and idolatrous religion. There Paul founded a church (Acts 18:1–17), and two of his letters are addressed "to the church of God which is at Corinth" (1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1).

First Corinthians reveals the problems, pressures, and struggles of a church called out of a pagan society. Paul addresses a variety of problems in the lifestyle of the Corinthian church: factions, lawsuits, immorality, questionable practices, abuse of the Lord's Supper, and spiritual gifts. In addition to words of discipline, Paul shares words of counsel in answer to questions raised by the Corinthian believers.

The oldest recorded title of this epistle is *Pros Korinthious A,* in effect, the "First to the Corinthians." The *A* was no doubt a later addition to distinguish this book from Second Corinthians.

WATCH WORDS

- **spiritual** (pertaining to the spirit, the opposite to what is fleshly or carnal)—2:13
- **stumbling block** (an obstacle that could cause a person to fall or sin)—8:9
- **authority** (freedom to exercise one's right)—9:18 (also 7:37; 8:9)
- **wisdom** (human spiritual or intellectual capacity)—12:8 (also 1:17, 19)
- **mature** (full-grown)—14:20 (also 13:10)

If you officiate or attend weddings—as I do—you often hear 1 Corinthians 13 being read. It's the love chapter of the Bible, which begins: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal."

Perhaps in addressing the Corinthians Paul was speaking to himself, for he needed all the love he could muster in dealing with this dysfunctional church. Corinth was a prominent city in Greece. It was a rich, immoral place, a city without self-control. In the first century, if you talked about "living like a Corinthian," everyone knew what you meant. It was code language for indulging in a wild and unrestrained lifestyle. Paul was concerned that believers in that city were living more like Corinthians than Christians. Both of his letters to Corinth—1 and 2 Corinthians—were problem-solving letters, and 1 Corinthians deals primarily with interchurch problems. As Paul worked his way through the letter, he tackled one troublesome area after another: disunity, immorality, lawsuits, confusion about marriage, abuses of the Lord's Supper, disrespect in worship, heresy about the Resurrection, and lack of discipline in finances.

But in the middle of it all, he spoke of the love we need for dealing with troublesome people in our lives, and his words still ring true in our hearts: "Love suffers long and is kind; love . . . bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:4, 7-8).

KEY THOUGHT:

Christians are to live more like citizens of heaven than citizens of earth, which requires us to exhibit healthy hearts and united churches.

KEY VERSES:

"My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."
1 Corinthians 2:4-5

KEY ACTION:

Ask the Lord of the Church to restore the selfless love that only He can give and grow.

KEY PRAYER:

God, please give me the "agape" love that never fails.

Introduction to

1 CORINTHIANS

BACKGROUND

The city of Corinth was a major seaport and the capital of Achaia, in Greece. Two-thirds of the city's population were slaves. Corinth boasted many temples, the most famous being to Aphrodite, goddess of love; because of the temple's prostitutes, the city was identified with its immorality. The city also had a Jewish community, evidenced by archaeological remains of a synagogue. The author of 1 Corinthians is attested to in the book's first two verses: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, unto the church of God which is at Corinth." Paul is also cited as the author in 16:21.

MESSAGE

Paul feels responsible for the Corinthian church, since he helped found it while on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1–17). When Paul writes 1 Corinthians, the church is struggling with disunity, immorality, and the general difficulty of living as godly believers in a secular culture. Paul encourages them in unity in and through Christ. He confronts sin in the church community and comments about the advisability of marriage. He advocates freedom in Christ, lived out responsibly for the sake of the larger community. Toward the end of the admonishing text, Paul gives a critical teaching about the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and the church as a body with many members or parts, each with its specific function. Buried in this teaching is the often-cited chapter (13:1–13) on the virtue of love, or charity. Yet another memorable passage draws the reader's hope to the resurrection and the resurrected Christ: "But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (15:57).

TIME

Paul's first letter to the believers in Corinth was written in Ephesus (16:8) circa A.D. 55.

OUTLINE

I. The Need for Unity 1:1–9
- A. Introduction 1:1–9
- B. God's wisdom is best 1:10–2:16
- C. A call to unity in the church 3:1–4:21

II. Sins that Separate 5:1–6:20
- A. Sexual sins 5:1–13
- B. Lawsuits among believers 6:1–8
- C. Other sexual sins 6:9–20

III. Instructions for Living 7:1–16:4
- A. Marriage 7:1–40
- B. Christian freedom 8:1–10:33
- C. Public worship 11:1–34
- D. Spiritual gifts 12:1–14:40
- E. The resurrection of the dead 15:1–58

IV. Greetings and Instructions 16:1–24

BASIC SURVEY

1 CORINTHIANS

AUTHOR: The apostle Paul, with the assistance of Sosthenes (1:1).

DATE: Approximately AD 55–57.

IN TEN WORDS OR LESS

An apostle tackles sin problems in the church at Corinth.

DETAILS, PLEASE

Paul had helped found the church in Corinth (Acts 18) but then moved on to other mission fields. In Ephesus, he learns of problems in the Corinthian congregation and writes a letter to address those issues. Paul first deals with sectarianism and then addresses a situation of sexual immorality. He also warns Christians involved in lawsuits against fellow believers and teaches on marriage, Christian liberty, the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection of the dead. In the famous thirteenth chapter, Paul describes the "more excellent way" (12:31 KJV): that of charity, or love.

QUOTABLE

> For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God (1:18 KJV).

> For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ (3:11 KJV).

UNIQUE AND UNUSUAL

Refuting opponents who questioned Paul's apostleship, he insists that he is as much an apostle as Jesus' original disciples. "Am I am not an apostle?" he asks in 1 Corinthians 9:1 (KJV). "Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?"

SO WHAT?

Church problems are nothing new—neither is the way to correct them. Personal purity, self-discipline, and love for others are vital to a congregation's success.

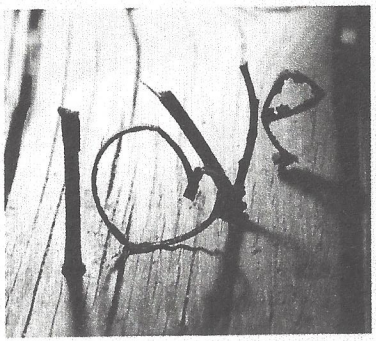
READ 1 CORINTHIANS 1–2.

- One-Month Course: your next reading is on page 220. →
- Three-Month Course: your next reading is on page 216. →
- Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 216. →

HEART OF THE BOOK

Love—The Greatest Virtue

The kind of love Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13 (the "Love Chapter") is so great that many people think they'll never be able to overcome all their anger, jealousy, and prejudices and have that kind of love. Well, they might not have it at the beginning, but as they continue to yield their hearts to God on a daily basis, they will. The Bible says, "God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us" (Romans 5:5 NIV). So Christians need to pray for God to give them more of His Spirit and His love.



Love is at the heart of all of Jesus' teachings. We set ourselves apart from the world as Christians by loving others as God loves us.

Remember, Paul didn't come up with these thoughts on his own. He taught them because they're the most basic of all Christian teachings. Jesus declared that the greatest commandments were to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:35–40). Jesus also taught that love should be the distinguishing virtue of all Christians: "Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples" (John 13:35 NLT). This is because, as the Bible tells us, God Himself is love (1 John 4:8 KJV).

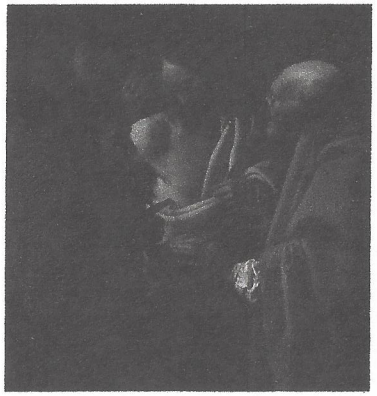
The presence of genuine love is one of the proofs that someone has God in his or her life: "The fruit of the Spirit is love" (Galatians 5:22 KJV). And John tells us that the surest evidence that a person loves God is if they love others (1 John 3:10–23; 4:7–19).

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 9 AND 13.

- Three-Month Course: your next reading is on page 220. →
- Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 217. →

CLOSER LOOK

Our Resurrection Bodies



Hendrick ter Brugghen (1588–1629) depicted Thomas seeking proof of Christ's resurrection in the painting *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. We, too, will have resurrected bodies when Jesus returns.

Some people think that Jesus saves just their spirit, so when their body dies, they leave it behind forever and only their spirit lives eternally in heaven. They guess that it sort of floats around on clouds forever, because it is just a spirit, after all. Christians' spirits *do* go to heaven at first, but God has a long-term plan: He wants to save their physical bodies, too, and reunite them with their spirits. To do this He will resurrect their bodies. To "resurrect" means to bring back to life.

For their bodies to live forever, God must *change* them to make them powerful and indestructible and eternal—just like Jesus' resurrection body. "If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies" (Romans 8:11 NKJV). "The Lord Jesus Christ. . . will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:20–21 NIV).

Although they're natural physical bodies now, perishable and weak, they will become glorious, powerful, eternal bodies. "So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:42–44 NIV).

The resurrection will happen at the very end of time when Jesus returns (1 Thessalonians 4:14–17).

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 14–15.

- Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 220. →

HIDDEN TREASURE

AVOIDING SECTARIANISM

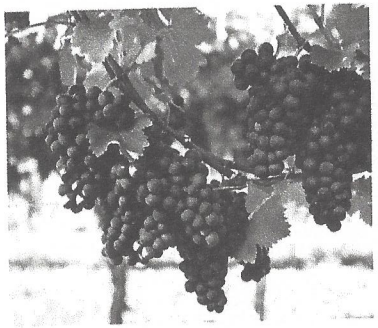
Paul warned the Christians of Corinth against divisions. Some of them were insisting, "I follow Paul." Others were arguing, "I follow Peter," and others were boasting, "I follow Apollos." Paul asked, "Was Paul crucified for you?" (1 Corinthians 1:12–13 NIV). Of course not. Jesus was, so we should all follow Jesus. We should respect every person who truly follows Him, no matter which pastor they prefer to listen to or which church they attend. We might think that our pastor is better, but it's wrong to think that only the people in our church are true Christians. We should accept other Christians who have different opinions (Romans 14:1–6). If we agree on the important things about Jesus, we can be in unity and love one another (Ephesians 4:3–6).

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 3–4.

HIDDEN TREASURE

JOINED TO THE LORD

Many Christians think that the description of Jesus "living in their heart" is simply a poetic phrase and that it can't mean that literally. After all, as far as they understand, God is up in a distant heaven and they are down here on earth. But the Bible says, "He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him" (1 Corinthians 6:17 NKJV). The Spirit of Christ truly *does* live in our hearts (Galatians 4:6). In fact, He is inseparably united with our spirit. This is precisely what gives us eternal life. Jesus taught this same concept in John 15 when He described Himself as the true vine and described individual believers as branches *joined* to Him and receiving His life.



Jesus described Himself as the true vine, and we are His branches because we draw life from Him.

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 6 AND 8.

HIDDEN TREASURE

OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES

Some Christians wonder whether the Old Testament is still relevant now that Jesus has come and fulfilled the requirements of the Law and the prophecies of the prophets. After all, the Bible says, "He cancels the first covenant in order to put the second into effect" (Hebrews 10:9 NLT). But Paul explains that the entire Old Testament was written for our benefit and that there is much that we can learn from it. After discussing the example of the children of Israel, Paul stated, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for *our* instruction" (1 Corinthians 10:11 NASB, emphasis added). We can even draw new lessons from old commandments in the scriptures (see 1 Corinthians 9:6–11).

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 10–11.

HIDDEN TREASURE

WE ARE ONE BODY

One of the results of being joined to Christ is that the same Spirit who's in us is *also* in other sincere believers. So in a very real sense, the Spirit unites us with *them* as well. Paul described this, saying, "For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. . . . Now you are the body of Christ and members individually" (1 Corinthians 12:12, 27 NKJV). He then drew the logical conclusion: just as an entire body looks out for one member that is in pain, so the body of Christ should care for each individual member (vv. 25–26). Jesus is the head (Ephesians 4:15–16), and we are the body, His to command.

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12 AND 16.

1 Corinthians

Book Introduction

As the apostle Paul catalogued the horrendous trials he had endured as an apostle of Jesus Christ, he ended the list with these words: "Besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28).

It is remarkable that Paul would cite his concern for the churches—with all their struggles, failures, perils, and growing pains—on the same list with being beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, imprisoned, and fighting off thieves, starvation, and homelessness.

If there seems to be a disconnection between Paul's life-threatening physical trials and the spiritual pressure of caring for fledgling churches, it is only because most people have never done the latter. And if Paul was going to be particularly concerned for the church in any particular city, Corinth was the one—arguably the most frustrating, dysfunctional church of all.

Corinth was a prominent and important city in the Greek state of Achaia. Athens held sway as the intellectual capital of the region (Acts 17:16–34), but when it came to the sensory and sensual life of Greece, Corinth was without peer. It was the commercial capital of the area: land traffic from Achaia to Macedonia and points north passed through the city, and most sea traffic from the eastern Mediterranean bound for Rome stopped in Corinth's port. Corinth was rich and immoral, a city that lived without self-control.

In the world of the first century, if you talked about "living like a Corinthian," most everyone knew exactly what you meant. It was code language for indulging in a wild and unrestrained life. Sadly, the Corinthian Christians often fit the stereotype of their pagan peers. Somehow, perhaps because of their culture, or possibly because of some warped teaching they had received, the Corinthian believers felt that in Christ they had full license to do whatever they pleased.

Paul was concerned that the believers in that city were living more like Corinthians than like Christians, more like citizens of this world than citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

Paul visited Corinth for the first time on his second missionary journey—somewhere between AD 49 and 52—and stayed in Corinth for a year and a half. He might not have stayed that long had the Lord not spoken to him directly in a vision, saying: "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9–11). Those "many people," won to Christ during Paul's 18-month stay, became the nucleus of the Corinthian church.

What It Says | *An Undisciplined Church and a Concerned Apostle*

Paul visited Corinth and a church was born. Three years later, on his third missionary journey, he was headquartered in Ephesus for two to three years. During that period, Paul received urgent—and undoubtedly stressful—information about problems in the Corinthian congregation. Some communication from "Chloe's household" alerted him to "contentions" in the church (1:11).

Both of Paul's letters to Corinth (1 and 2 Cor.) were problem-solving letters, indicating the level of remedial work needed to bring the church into alignment with principles of love, unity, sound doctrine, and respect for authority. This one deals primarily with interchurch problems.

As he addressed things, Paul used the phrase "Now concerning . . ." six times before offering specific guidance on each issue (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12). As a spiritual father to these immature believers, the apostle set out to tackle the troublesome areas one at a time, revealing his deep concern—and perhaps his frustration, too. Knowing he would soon be visiting them after his stay in Ephesus, he wrote, "What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?" (4:21). He preferred the latter but was prepared for the former if the Corinthian believers failed to address their critical issues, which included divisions, immorality, lawsuits among believers, confusion about marriage, eating food sacrificed to pagan idols, abuses of the Lord's Supper, improper decorum in worship services, abuses of spiritual gifts, confusion about the Resurrection, and lack of discipline in finances.

What It Means | *Addressing Both Doctrine and Practice*

Paul addressed at least six identifiable themes in this first letter to the believers in Corinth:

- **Wisdom:** In no other epistle does Paul so eloquently compare the shortcomings of human wisdom in light of divine wisdom (1:18—2:16).
- **Rewards:** Paul mentions the coming Judgment Seat of Christ by name twice in his letters—briefly in Romans 14:10 and 2 Corinthians 5:10. But in 3:11–15, he connects the forthcoming rewards for Christians to Christ's judgment.
- **Spiritual Gifts in the Church:** These gifts are discussed four times in the NT: Romans 12, Ephesians 4, 1 Peter 4, and 1 Corinthians 12—14. The longest instruction on the topic (three chapters) is directed at the Corinthians because of their abuse of the gifts and their failure to submit their gifts to the priority of love (12—14).
- **Resurrection:** The greatest presentation of human resurrection—both Christ's and the coming resurrection of believers—is found in 15:1–58. Paul solidifies Christ's resurrection as both the linchpin of Christian theology and the basis of the believer's hope for eternal life.
- **Christian Living:** Paul addresses practical problems that would be confronted by any group of Christians coming out of a pagan background like that of Corinth: immorality (5:1–12; 6:12–20), settling disputes between believers (6:1–11), Christian marriage (7:1–40), the tension between liberty and license (8:1–13; 10:23—11:1), and separating pagan feasts from the Lord's Supper (11:17–22).
- **Love:** Following 12 chapters of patient, apostolic teaching, correction, and problem solving, it is as though a shaft of resplendent light suddenly knifes through an overcast sky. Paul writes, "I show you a more excellent way," and then, under the anointing and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he launches into one of the most moving, transcendent treatises on love in all of human literature. First Corinthians 13 is like a perfect flower pushing its way up through the common mud of church struggles and petty human divisions.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU | *The Forgotten Priority*

Where does one begin with a contentious, undisciplined, out-of-balance, problem-filled church? Deep into his letter, Paul seems to set aside his long list of church problems and headaches to write about . . . *agape* love.

Whenever there are problems—in a church or a marriage or any significant relationship—the first thing to slip out the back door is the steady, timeless, selfless, sacrificial love that Jesus modeled. When Jesus wrote His own letter to the church in Ephesus (Rev. 2:1–5), He complimented them on their hard work and their accurate doctrine, but He also brought a serious charge against them: They had lost their love. As a result, they were about to lose everything else.

Maybe the place to start with our relational problem-solving efforts is to first ask the Lord of the church to restore the selfless love that only He can give, maintain, and ultimately perfect.

SPOTLIGHT > THE GIFT REGISTRY

In several places Paul and Peter write about "spiritual gifts" and give examples. Here's an alphabetical list that combines all the gifts specifically tagged in the Greek text as *charismata* (literally, "grace-gifts") from God.

Is this list exhaustive? Not necessarily, say many Bible scholars. But even so, it forms a bountiful registry on its own.

SPIRITUAL GIFT	REFERENCE(S)
Discernment of good spirits from bad	1 Corinthians 12:10
Encouraging	Romans 12:8
Giving money	Romans 12:8
Interpreting unknown languages	1 Corinthians 12:10
Kindness	Romans 12:8
Power to heal the sick	1 Corinthians 12:9
Power to perform miracles	1 Corinthians 12:10
Prophecy	Romans 12:6; 1 Corinthians 12:10; 1 Peter 4:10
Salvation; eternal life	Romans 5:15-16; 6:23
Serving	Romans 12:7; 1 Peter 4:10
Speaking in unknown languages	1 Corinthians 12:10
Great faith	1 Corinthians 12:9
Special knowledge	1 Corinthians 12:8
Teaching	Romans 12:7
Wise advice	1 Corinthians 12:8

Duties to Spouse and to God

1 Corinthians 7

BEFORE A MAN AND A WOMAN SAY, "I do," have they soberly assessed the requirements of marriage? For the apostle Paul, the wedding vow was more than a mere human commitment. It involved commitments to God.

In writing about marriage, Paul wanted to make sure husbands and wives understood what they were promising. He addressed a variety of issues, indicating when he was referring directly to the teaching of Jesus and when he was speaking from his own God-given wisdom. Among his conclusions:

1. Marriage isn't about self-fulfillment; it's about sacrifice and service (1 Corinthians 7:3-5). In sex or in other matters, don't think about what you need; instead, let your spouse's needs take precedence.

2. Singleness is okay (7:1, 7-8). Paul preferred celibacy to marriage and considered singleness a better state for serving God. Today some people see singleness as a curse, but Paul saw it as a potential blessing.

3. Commitment is important (7:10-16). If you've said, "I do," don't try switching to "I don't." Honor your vows by sticking with your spouse.

4. Consider the times and the seasons (7:17-38). In light of everything going on in the world as well as in your personal ministry as a Christian, does marriage actually make sense? Paul, though unmarried himself, knew that marriage tends to take away believers' already limited time to serve the Lord. As a result, Paul counseled against getting married so that single men and women could spend all their time and energy serving God. If you are single today, twenty centuries after Paul penned this letter, the question of whether marriage is for you is still worth considering.

Paul's ultimate message to lovebirds is this: Marriage is serious. Don't take it lightly.

What to Wear on Sunday

1 Corinthians 11:3-16

THIS PASSAGE PUZZLES a lot of readers, both male and female. In order to properly understand Paul's instructions regarding public worship, we need to jump back to the Middle Eastern culture where Christianity was born. That culture had very strict guidelines about how men and women were to relate to each other. In some Jewish circles, a woman who appeared in public without her veil was a disgrace to her family and to herself. Such inappropriate behavior was seen as a reasonable cause for her husband to divorce her.

The Corinthian culture was far less structured. So Paul addressed gender-based questions about what was appropriate and what was not.

His instructions for women concerning head coverings and hair length are primarily cultural in nature, but they also raise important issues about male-female distinctions. It was important for women to show proper respect for their husbands and for God. Paul's central argument was that though men and women are dependent on one another (1 Corinthians 11:11-12), God created them differently and gave men a kind of spiritual preeminence (11:7-8).

What are we to make of these comments? We cannot just toss this passage out of the New Testament. Various Christian groups have come to various understandings—in many cases after heated discussions.

At the very least, we can affirm that there are important, God-given differences between men and women that should be honored. We can agree that Christians should respect some cultural conventions so as not to cause scandal. And we can take note of an important fact underlying Paul's instructions: Women were allowed to pray or prophesy in the church just as men were (11:5). Our common ability to approach the throne of God is a privilege for which men and women alike should be grateful.

1 CORINTHIANS

THE BIG PICTURE

The Greek city of Corinth was noted for its corruption, immorality and pagan religions. Following Christ in that setting meant leaving behind many of the practices accepted by the larger society. This presented the new believers with all kinds of temptations and problems.

Though the Corinthian believers had received new life in Christ, they still had much to learn. It would take time for them to mature. These believers needed further instructions about following Christ and understanding God's perspectives about right and wrong. Paul wrote this letter to help them make progress—to give them advice about how to change.

Our spiritual renewal often involves a similar struggle with the surrounding environment. Though we determine to change, the world in which we live stays much the same. We live and work with the same people, go to many of the same places and do many of the same things—all while trying to make significant changes in our lives. The feelings of loneliness that result can make us as vulnerable as the Corinthian believers once were.

Despite the difficulties we face, God understands our struggle. That is why he has given us his Word, his power and his people; they are all available to help us. This letter alone contains numerous insights for ongoing spiritual renewal. Through the book of 1 Corinthians, we can learn how to separate ourselves from our old ways of life, begin living lives surrendered to God's righteous rule, and follow new standards. Our spiritual renewal may be slow, maybe even painful, but by God's grace and our commitment, God will transform us.

SPIRITUAL RENEWAL THEMES

JESUS IS THE CENTER OF OUR SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

The Corinthian believers' lives illustrate what happens when we take our eyes off Jesus Christ. Though these people were followers of Christ, they identified themselves primarily with their various teachers. This caused unnecessary divisions among them and kept them from making progress in their spiritual growth. While the support and advice of others are important, our Savior is Jesus Christ. He must be the center of all our efforts; we must focus on him and honor him above any person or plan for spiritual growth.

A. THE CHURCH IN SPIRITUAL DECLINE (1:1 — 6:20)
   1. Divisions: Infighting Among the Believers (1:1 — 4:21)
   2. Disorders: Serving Self Before God (5:1 — 6:20)

B. THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN SPIRITUAL RENEWAL (7:1 — 16:24)
   1. Contentment: Being Happy Where We Are (7:1 – 40)
   2. Instruction: Personal Worship (8:1 — 10:33)
   3. Instruction: Public Worship (11:1 — 14:40)
   4. Encouragement: Christ Is With Us (15:1 — 16:24)

Essential Facts

PURPOSE:
To encourage the Corinthian believers to resolve their problems and honor God.

AUTHOR:
The apostle Paul.

AUDIENCE:
The church at Corinth, a city in Greece.

DATE WRITTEN:
Around AD 55, near the end of Paul's three-year stay in Ephesus.

SETTING:
Corinth was a large, cosmopolitan city that teemed with idolatry and immorality. The church in Corinth was fairly new and was made up of many non-Jewish (Gentile) believers.

KEY VERSE:
"By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them — yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (15:10).

KEY PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS:
Paul with Timothy, Chloe's household and the Corinthian believers.

FREEDOM WITH LOVING RESTRAINT

The new believers in Corinth had to make a clean break with their past. Some of these believers were mature and no longer bothered by the temptations that had plagued them as new Christians. But others were not so secure in their faith. Paul instructed the more mature believers not to flaunt their freedom around those who still struggled. Our successful spiritual growth doesn't give us license to be inconsiderate or insensitive to others. We can show support for one another by being careful about how we use our freedom. We will always have this responsibility to care for one another.

LIFE IS TO BE ENJOYED RESPONSIBLY

The believers at Corinth lived in a very immoral, pleasure-seeking society. The standards of conduct that God set for them were quite different from the standards of their culture. But if the believers thought God's standards seemed too restrictive, they were mistaken. Longing for "freedom" apart from God's laws is like a train longing for freedom from the railroad track. The sinful behaviors that seem so tempting will only leave us stuck if we give in, and derailed from the good life God intends for us. God challenges us to live uncompromising lives because he knows that only then will we enjoy life at its deepest level and progress smoothly in our spiritual lives. What may appear to be narrow limitations in God's standards are actually guidelines designed to help us experience life as it was meant to be!

THE INVITATION TO LOVE

One of the most beautiful passages on love ever written is found in chapter 13 of this letter to the Corinthians. It describes love in terms of selfless action, not merely as an emotion. If we love, then we will act in selfless ways. When we don't feel loving or don't feel loved, 1 Corinthians 13 is a wonderful reminder of how God loves us and how we can show love to others.

1 Corinthians

"He's growing like a weed."

We've all heard that description. That's what aunts and grandparents say when they haven't seen how tall we've gotten over the last several months. Well, then you'll understand the kind of growth that was occurring at the church at Corinth; it was sprawling like an untrained grapevine. More and more people got involved every day. Corinth was the place to be! Unfortunately, there was no real agreement on the foundations of the faith. Some believed one thing, others another. Who was right? Who was wrong?

Thankfully, Paul came to the rescue with his first letter to the Corinthians. Since Corinth was such a young church, they still had much to learn. The issues raised in this letter are exceptionally relevant to problems facing the Christian church today. That's one reason we can learn so much by studying its wise words.

The first four chapters of 1 Corinthians discuss whether or not believers should bow down to the world's wisdom or stand up for God's truth. Of course, if someone asks us if we're supposed to do what God wants or listen to the world's foolishness, we know what we *should* say. And yet if we're honest, sometimes the decision is difficult, especially if we're not sure what we believe or why.

In chapters 5–7, Paul discusses some painful issues. Some of the Corinthian believers put their physical desires above their spiritual needs and treated each other as objects. Lawsuits were prevalent as well—another indication that Christians cared more about their rights (and money) than serving others. Sound familiar? No different from today.

Idol worship is the topic of chapters 8–10. Rather than putting their trust in the Maker of the universe, the Corinthians were tempted by gods made of wood and stone. We'd like to think that we'd never fall for such a trap, but if we only look around our rooms, we see signs of what's really important in our lives: music, movies, clothes, food, or games. Whatever gets first priority in our lives ahead of God could be considered an idol.

In chapter 12, we find an aid to Christian unity: a list of spiritual gifts. Gifts are the way that the body of Christ works together. But probably the best known chapter in 1 Corinthians is chapter 13: the love chapter—a solid, practical list of what love is and isn't. Within chapters 11–14 we see Paul take on the topic of the wealthy putting on a show during the service. That's probably why he spent so many verses talking about the meaning of love. He wanted to make the priorities of God clear.

Chapter 15 discusses questions about resurrection. Greek thinkers found it very difficult to accept the idea that Christ rose from the dead. Yet the resurrection is the keystone of the Christian faith.

This letter provided practical help for Christians who were still growing. It still does. Perhaps there is no better advice for growing Christians than this: "Be alert, stand firm in the faith, act like a man, be strong" (16:13).

Author: Paul (Saul of Tarsus)

Date: Written around A.D. 54 in Ephesus

What in the world is going on?

44 B.C.	Julius Caesar makes Corinth a Roman colony
A.D. 26–30	Years of Jesus' ministry
A.D. 33	Saul of Tarsus converts and is later known as Paul
A.D. 46	Greek biographer Plutarch is born
A.D. 47–49	Ostorius Scapula leads the Romans against tribes living in Wales (the Silures and Ordovices) for control of Wales
A.D. 49	The Roman emperor, Claudius, forces the Jews out of Rome. Priscilla and Aquila leave Rome and wind up in Corinth where they meet Paul
ca A.D. 50–52	Paul visits Corinth for the first time on his second missionary journey
ca A.D. 50	The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a Greek navigational manuscript describing Roman ports and first-century trade, is written
A.D. 54–68	Nero rules the Roman Empire
A.D. 54	Paul writes 1 Corinthians from Ephesus

Personal Gold
from LEIGHTON FORD

INTRODUCTIONS, PLEASE

One of the greatest needs today is for "introducers"—people who know how to put others in touch with Jesus Christ. Much of the world is aware of him, but who is going to introduce them to him? Many of us teach Sunday school, take part in Bible study groups, live ethical lives—and all of this is important. But Jesus Christ is a living person, not a formula, activity, or organization. Sharing our faith ultimately means *introducing persons to the Person.*

Andrew, one of Jesus' first band of twelve, was sort of nondescript, seldom mentioned except in a list with the other disciples. Interestingly, every time Andrew is mentioned by himself, he's introducing others to Jesus. In John 1 we read that he brought his brother to Jesus; in John 12 he brought to Jesus some Greeks who wanted to meet him. But think what came out of those introductions: one of the greatest leaders in the New Testament—Simon Peter! One of the greatest statements Jesus ever made—when he saw the Greeks coming, he said, "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself" (John 12:32, NLT).

We are not salesmen but co-workers with God.

Each of us ought to aspire to be an introducer like Andrew.

It is tremendous to realize that we are not salesmen but co-workers with God. He is the evangelist; we are the introducers. You and I cannot convert anyone, but God can use us to help lead people to him. Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me" (John 6:44, NLT).

Being an introducer requires a combination of humble patience and obedient expectancy. There is no more humbling experience than being on hand when God brings someone to himself. To see God creatively break into a life freshens my own spirit! It is like observing the birth of a child. As spiritual "midwives" we need to watch how God is leading someone to himself so we may aid him.

The key word here is faith. God is going to do his work in his way in his time and will use our witness as he wants. If we really believe this, we won't manipulate people or play on their emotions. We won't try to persuade people in any way that restricts their freedom. We won't seduce people for Christ by getting them to make the right decision for the wrong reason. We will urge people lovingly, but we won't push people who are not ready. We will watch for God's moment. We will introduce everybody we can, but we will force no one.

Sex and the Sanctuary

1 Corinthians 5

CORINTH WAS A COSMOPOLITAN CITY known for its high finances and low morals—a tough place to be a faithful Christian. There were sexual problems even within the community of believers. "I am told that a man in your church is living in sin with his stepmother," wrote Paul, confronting the sin of incest and adultery (1 Corinthians 5:1).

He challenged the Corinthians to practice church discipline by gathering to "throw this man out" of the fellowship (5:5). This may seem harsh and judgmental, but Paul said it was necessary to address flagrant sin in the church.

In our time, most churches hesitate to be this tough on their members. We'd rather launch public campaigns to curb society's seemingly endless appetite for sexual sin. But, interestingly, Paul said sinful behavior is par for the course with unbelievers. "It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders," he said (5:12). Meanwhile, the entire church should judge those within its midst who persist in blatant sin. "Don't even eat with such people," said Paul (5:11).

Paul's goal was important: to preserve the purity of the church in a dark world. Even with such measures no church will be perfect. But with appropriate discipline, sin won't flourish as it did in Corinth.

+ + + Men, Women, & God

Hitting Below the Belt

1 Corinthians 6:9-20

SOME CRITICS SAY that Christians are preoccupied with below-the-belt issues: promiscuity, homosexuality, abortion. In this powerful chapter, Paul explains that sexual sins involving the body are directly related to spiritual issues involving the soul.

The Corinthians seemed to hold a confused concept of spiritual freedom. They claimed that what they did with the physical body didn't really hurt the immortal soul. It's an intriguing argument—at least superficially. But Paul didn't buy it.

Paul compared people's hunger for sex with their hunger for food, arguing that those who are slaves to food misunderstand the purpose of the stomach. Those who are slaves to sex are equally confused.

When Paul talked about prostitutes, every citizen of Corinth understood. His main point, however, was something they may not have heard before. When you join yourself with a prostitute, the apostle explained, you make yourself one with her, thus sinning against the body, which is the "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19). In other words, what you do with your body *does* influence your soul. The two are related; physical sin corrupts the spiritual being.

Sexual sin matters. It's not that believers are sexually uptight. It's merely that we care about our souls and are well aware of the powerful impact sin has on both our physical and spiritual lives.

How the Good, the Bad and the Holy Shape Our Character

Read: **1 Corinthians 10:6** | **Habit: Character Formation**

The entire Bible—from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22—is about Jesus (see Lk 24:44–47). This is one of the most important realizations we can have when reading Scripture. But the Bible is also a story about humankind, which leads us to ask: is there anything we can learn from the examples of the men and women of the Bible, lessons that can be applied to our own lives?

In two foundational texts from the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 11, we are told how to consider both the positive and negative examples of human behavior found in the Bible.

Indeed, Scripture commands us to do just that. In two foundational texts from the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 11, we are told how to consider both the positive and negative examples of human behavior found in the Bible.[5]

Here are three things to consider:

1. *Look for direct references*—The most important principle in using human examples from the Bible, especially from the Old Testament, is to follow what Scripture says to follow and avoid what Scripture says to avoid. Our first question when considering a human example is, "What does the Bible say about them?" For example, Paul references the events mentioned in Exodus and Numbers and says, "These things occurred as examples" (1Co 10:6) for us. Paul is clear that the Israelites are (generally) examples of what not to do.
2. *See Jesus first*—Whenever we see a Biblical figure worthy of emulation, it's helpful to remember they are modeling a "true and better" example—Jesus. As Timothy Keller says, Jesus is the true and better Adam, the true and better Moses, the true and better Esther, and so on.[6] We look to them because they point to the "true and better" example.
3. *Emulate their faith, avoid their unbelief*—Hebrews 11 lists more than 20 examples of believers in the Old Testament who had faith in God and thus "received their commendation" (v. 2). The most important lesson we can learn from any Biblical hero is to follow their example by having faith in God and acting on that faith. Alternatively, the examples to avoid are generally figures that engage in rebellion, unbelief and have set their hearts on evil things (v. 6).

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAY: The Bible, which instructs us to model scriptural examples of faithfulness and avoid examples of unbelief and rebellion, is also our guidebook in learning how to grow as faithful Christians.

DO WHAT YOU LOVE TO SHOW GOD'S LOVE

1 Corinthians 12:7

Too often many of us have viewed the spiritual gifts primarily as talents God has given us for our own benefit. When considered in this way, spiritual gifts become "options" or "luxuries" that can be neglected or used according to our own whims instead of expressed through the discipline of service. But the Bible teaches us that God gives us spiritual gifts for the benefit of others and to continue Christ's work on earth. Paul asserted that "to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). The gifts God has entrusted to us belong to the community of believers.

You can begin to discover your gift by prayerfully considering when you have felt the greatest energy and satisfaction in serving the Lord. Also consider these words from Psalms: "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4). The good desires we have can be clues to finding our spiritual gifts. Paul lists a variety of spiritual gifts in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4.

God has woven a unique design into each of our hearts. Our gifts form a part of this fabric. As we do what we love to show others God's love, we find spiritual fulfillment and renewal.

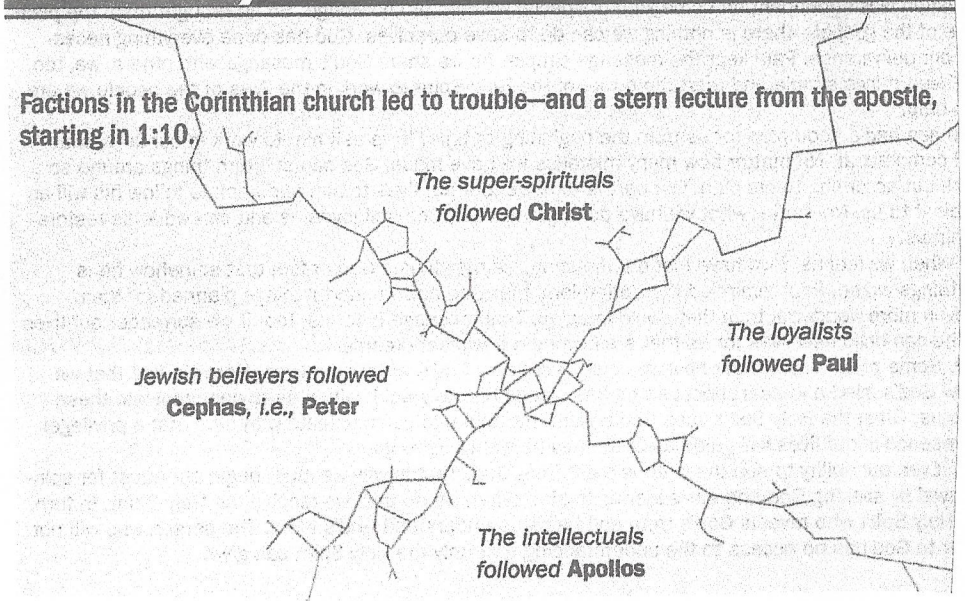
PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

When have you felt the greatest energy and satisfaction in serving the Lord? Read the lists of spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6–8, 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11. Which gifts are evidenced in your most enjoyable experiences? How are you using your spiritual gifts to serve others? What could you do to further develop your gifts in service?

For more on service, turn to 1 Corinthians 13.

SPOTLIGHT > SPLINTERED

Factions in the Corinthian church led to trouble—and a stern lecture from the apostle, starting in 1:10.



LIFE LESSONS: Glorifying human leaders can cause disunity among believers (1:11–13).

1 CORINTHIANS

INTERSECTION

Historians record that at the time of this writing, the city of Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. It had a population of around 700,000 and was the site of many temples to false gods.

GROWING UP

Topics Specific to Church Growth

- Sexual purity *(7:1–40)*
- Spiritual purity *(8:1–10:33)*
- Communion *(11:17–34)*
- Spiritual gifts *(chapters 12 and 14)*
- God's love *(chapter 13)*
- Orderly worship *(14:26–40)*
- The resurrection *(chapter 15)*

In the Word

The church at Corinth had so many problems that Paul dedicated the first six chapters of his letter to addressing the issues of divisions in the church, people's foolishness and God's wisdom, spiritual maturity, worship of human leaders, sexual immorality and lawsuits among believers. Chapter 7 then begins with "Now for the matters you wrote about . . ."

BY THE NUMBERS

16 CHAPTERS

437 VERSES

9,721 WORDS

DID YOU KNOW?

▶ In spite of facing rejection in the synagogue and other opposition, Paul stayed in Corinth a year and a half, preaching the Word and building up the body of believers.

LIFE LESSONS: God gives spiritual gifts to strengthen the body of Christ (12:7–11). Jesus conquered death (15:55).

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW 1 CORINTHIANS?

1 CORINTHIANS IN REVIEW

MINUTIAE & MISCELLANY

1. What does Paul say God exposes?

A. Backstabbers and blind guides
B. Motives of the heart
C. Fools who think they are wise
D. False prophets

HOT SEAT

2. I co-wrote the book of 1 Corinthians with Paul. Who am I?

MINUTIAE & MISCELLANY

3. What does Paul say the message of the cross is to those who are perishing?

A. Misunderstood knowledge
B. Unattainable wisdom
C. Foolishness
D. Judgment

WHO SAID IT?

4. "Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" Who is Paul quoting?

MINUTIAE & MISCELLANY

5. What does Paul say God has done to the wisdom of the world?

TIME TRAVELER

6. You are the person Paul quotes when he says, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." Who are you?

MINUTIAE & MISCELLANY

7. Who does Paul say the gift of speaking in tongues is a sign to?

A. Unbelievers
B. The Holy Spirit
C. The angels
D. Fellow believers

HOT SEAT

8. I don't understand it! When I speak in the tongues of men and angels, I only sound like a resounding gong or a clanging symbol. What am I missing?

MINUTIAE & MISCELLANY

9. Where does Paul say he was going before he would go to Corinth?

WHO DUNNIT?

10. Who at first was unwilling to go to Corinth but was persuaded by Paul to do so?

MINUTIAE & MISCELLANY

11. "Do everything in _____." (Fill in the blank.)

TIME TRAVELER

12. You and your wife told Paul to send your greetings to the church in Corinth. Who are you?

A. Apollos
B. Aquila
C. Peter
D. Barnabas

ANSWERS:

1. B (4:5) 2. Sosthenes (1:1) 3. C (1:18) 4. Isaiah (2:16; see Isaiah 40:13) 5. made it foolish (1:20) 6. David (10:26; see Psalm 24:1) 7. A (14:22–23) 8. love (13:1) 9. Macedonia (16:5) 10. Apollos (16:12) 11. love (16:14) 12. B (16:19)