

THE BOOK OF 1 CORINTHIANS

ORIENTING DATA FOR 1 CORINTHIANS

- Content: a letter of correction, in which Paul stands over against the Corinthians on issue after issue, mostly behavioral, but which are nevertheless betrayals of the gospel of Christ and the life in the Spirit
- Author: the apostle Paul
- Date: ca. A.D. 53–54, from Ephesus (see 16:8)
- Recipients: the church in Corinth, composed mostly of Gentiles (12:2; 8:7)
- Occasion: Paul responds to a letter from the church (7:1) and to reports he has received (1:11; 5:1)
- Emphases: a crucified Messiah as the central message of the gospel; the cross as God’s wisdom and power; Christian behavior that conforms to the gospel; the true nature of life in the Spirit; the future bodily resurrection of the Christian dead

OVERVIEW OF 1 CORINTHIANS

First Corinthians is the most difficult of the New Testament letters to summarize, because Paul deals in turn with no less than eleven different issues, sometimes in a length similar to some of his shorter letters (2 Thessalonians, Titus). Some items (on *divisions* and on *wisdom*, 1:10–4:21; on *incest*, 5:1–13; on *litigation*, 6:1–11; and on *going to prostitutes*, 6:12–20) are in direct response to reports from members of Chloe’s household (1:11, probably an Ephesian Christian whose servants have been in Corinth on business). This may very well be true of the *head covering* of women in 11:2–16 as well and is almost certainly true of the *Lord’s Table* correctives in 11:17–34.

The rest is in response to the Corinthians’ letter to him mentioned in 7:1, where he starts by taking up the question of *sex and marriage* (7:1–24). At 7:25 the formula “Now about [virgins]” occurs, repeated in 8:1 (“Now about food sacrificed to idols”); 12:1 (“Now about spiritual gifts”); 16:1 (“Now about the collection”); and 16:12 (“Now about our brother Apollos”). Most of these are in direct response to behavior that is being embraced by some or most of the believers in Corinth; in each case Paul is *correcting* them, not informing them about things they do not yet know (notice how often he prods them with “Don’t you know ...” where the implication is that they do in fact know; see 3:16; 5:6; 6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19; 9:13, 24). The only issue raised that is not behavioral is the bodily resurrection of believers in chapter 15, and here Paul specifically says that “some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead” (v. 12).

ca. *circa*, about, approximately

There is a degree of logic to the overall arrangement. He begins with matters reported to him (1:10–6:20), starting with the basic issue of divisions—within the community itself, but primarily over against Paul—before picking up other forms of breakdown in community relationships (incest, litigation, prostitution). Beginning at 7:1, he takes up issues from their letter, very likely in the order they occur. But when he comes to a couple of matters dealing with worship (attending idol feasts and the abuse of tongues), he inserts two other matters of worship that he has information about (head coverings and abuse of the Lord’s Table). He puts the issue of the resurrection at the end of his response to Spirit giftings, because it probably reflects the false theology (or spirituality) that is responsible for the Corinthians’ attitudes on most of the other issues as well. He concludes with more practical matters in chapter 16.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING 1 CORINTHIANS

To read 1 Corinthians well, you need some understanding of the city where the Corinthian believers lived. After lying dormant for nearly a hundred years, Corinth was refounded by Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. as a Roman colony. Because of its strategic location for commerce both north-south and east-west, by the time of Paul (one hundred years later) it had become the largest city in Roman Greece. By ancient standards it was a relatively new city, but it had quickly become cosmopolitan (having attracted people from all over the empire) and full of the *nouveau riche*. It was also very religious (all of the immigrants brought their deities), while at the same time morally decadent. So those who had become believers were from among this diverse population, both slave and free, Gentile and Jew (12:13), who brought a lot of their prior baggage with them to the Christian faith.

It is important as you read 1 Corinthians to be aware that the opposition to Paul in this letter (e.g. 4:3–5, 18–21; 9:1–2) was not from the outside—as in Galatians, 2 Corinthians 10–13, and 1 Thessalonians—but from within the church itself. A careful reading suggests that he and they (at least many of them) are at odds on every issue. They have either misunderstood or deliberately misinterpreted an earlier letter from him that prohibited certain vices (1 Cor 5:9–10) and have written to tell him why they think they are right and he is wrong (e.g. chs. 8–10; 12–14). And the conduct of some of them, which they have *not* written about, is so grotesquely unchristian that Paul is horrified that a Christian community could have brought itself to believe as they do. At times you can even pick out where Paul is citing them, often in agreement with their statement itself, but disagreeing with how they understand it (see 6:12–13; 7:1–2; 8:1, 4).

The primary place where he and they are at odds is over the question of *being spiritual*—what it means to be a person of the Spirit. This surfaces most sharply in chapters 12–15, where they apparently believe that speaking in tongues is to speak the language of angels (13:1)—they have thus already arrived at the ultimate state of spirituality, so much so that some of them have no use for a bodily resurrection (6:13–14; 15:12). This has also led to a triumphalist view of life in the present. Full of “wisdom” by the Spirit, they see Paul’s weaknesses as evidence of a lesser spirituality (4:6–21). In such a view there is no room for the life of the cross. Hence the ease whereby they reject Paul’s view on so many issues. Very likely their spirituality also lends itself to their low view of bodily activities (meaning they can indulge or be ascetic at will) so that some are even arguing against sexual life in marriage (7:1–7), and the traditional head coverings are being cast aside “because of the angels” (11:3–16, esp. v. 10).

Paul's basic response to all of this is to remind them that the gospel has a crucified Messiah, risen from the dead, at its very heart, and thus he bookends the letter with these two basic theological realities (the cross, 1:17–2:16; the resurrection, 15:1–58). Everything else in the letter must be understood in light of these; indeed, the most crucial role of the Spirit is to reveal the cross as the key to God's wisdom (2:6–16).

Because Paul sees the gospel itself at stake (especially because of the Corinthians' rejecting the centrality of the cross in Christian life), you will find his moods to run a wide gamut of emotion—confrontation (4:18–21; 9:1–12; 14:36–38), appeal (4:15–16; 10:31–11:1), sarcasm (4:8; 6:5, the “wise” aren't wise enough to settle disputes!), irony (1:26–28, no one in the name of wisdom would have chosen them to be God's people!), eloquence (13:1–8), and rhapsody (15:51–57)—but there is very little joy or pleasure to be found currently in his relationship with this church (and 2 Corinthians tells us it gets worse before it gets better).¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 324–327.