



1 Corinthians

This is a letter from Paul to the Christians in Corinth, in response to a letter that they had sent to Paul asking about various issues connected to worship and ethics. There is also a hint that Paul had received an independent report from 'Chloe's people' to which he was also responding in this letter. The heart of Paul's answer in chapters 12-13 is that they should approach all the ethical dilemmas that they faced and all the conflict that they were experiencing in the knowledge that they were all members together of the body of Christ and that they should behave towards one another with love.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 1 hour
Short of time? Just read 1.1-17; 5.1-13; 11.2-13; 15.1-58



Genre

Epistle



Anything tricky?

Probably the trickiest bits contain Paul's message about sexual ethics in chapters 5-7. It might help you to know that 1 Corinthians 7.1 "It is well for a man not to touch a woman" is thought to be a quote from the letter that the Corinthians wrote to Paul (with which he disagrees).

There are also Paul's comments about men and women in 1 Corinthians 11 and about women 'speaking' in the churches in 1 Corinthians 14 which have led to much disagreement and debate.



Inspiring quotes

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.
(1 Corinthians 1.18)

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
(1 Corinthians 3.16)

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant; or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things... For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.
(1 Corinthians 13.4-7, 12-13)

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.
(1 Corinthians 15.3-4)

And many more...



About the Author

1 Corinthians gives its authors as Paul and Sosthenes. Although there are two authors cited much of the epistle is in the first person suggesting that it is largely from Paul.

What do we know about him?

Paul is probably the best known of all the early Christians. Before encountering Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, he was a zealous Pharisee who sought to maintain the purity of Judaism. After his experience on the Damascus road, he turned his zeal to proclaiming Jesus Christ among the Gentiles. This brought him into conflict with some other early Christians, not least Peter, who thought that followers of Jesus Christ should convert to

Judaism. He travelled around the Roman Empire (though primarily in Asia Minor – modern-day Turkey – and Greece) proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and founding communities of Christians as he went. He also wrote a large number of letters, 13 of which are preserved in the New Testament. 1 Corinthians is one of these.

Sosthenes. The only other time that someone called Sosthenes is mentioned in the New Testament is in Acts 18.12-17 where Sosthenes is the chief ruler of the synagogue at Corinth. While this would make sense of him writing with Paul, there is nothing to explain why he had left Corinth and was now travelling with Paul.



About the times

Paul founded the Church in Corinth in the early 50s and it is thought that 1 Corinthians may have been written only a few years later in 53-54 ad.

What were people feeling?

The relationship between the Corinthians and Paul was notoriously rocky (and in fact degenerated further after this letter). The Corinthians seemed to be highly confident in their faith – you might say too confident – and were behaving with little consideration towards each other. Some think that the Corinthians believed that they had already risen from the dead and were behaving as though they were already triumphant.



What kind of Book is it?

An Epistle, or letter. As with all of Paul's epistles, this is a letter addressing the particular concerns and issues of its recipients. Possibly more than in any other epistle, in 1 Corinthians Paul addressed both what he had heard about the Corinthians and the questions that they had sent to him in a previous letter. His answers to these questions are normally prefixed with 'Now concerning...' (7.1; 7.25; 8.1; 12.1; 16.1 and 16.12).



How is it structured?

1.1-9	Greeting and thanksgiving
1.10-6.20	Paul's concerns about what he has heard about the Corinthian community
1.10-4.21	Divisions
5.1-6.20	Lack of accountability towards each other
7.1-14.40	Paul's response to the questions he has been asked about
7.1-40	On marriage
8.1-11.1	On responsibility for others
11.2-33	On how to behave in church and at the Lord's Supper
12.1-13.13	On spiritual gifts
14.1-40	On prophecy and worship
15.1-58	Why resurrection makes a difference to everything
16.1-12	On the importance of giving and on Paul's travel plans
16.13-24	Closing greetings



Look out for...

What Paul has to say about conflict and unity; it's a theme which runs all the way through the book. Based on what he says here, ask yourself what Paul might want to say to the Church today.

The best-loved chapter of 1 Corinthians is, of course, chapter 13. Look carefully at what Paul is saying about love in chapter 13 and then keep an eye out for similar themes as you read the whole book.

One of the most important chapters in 1 Corinthians is chapter 15 in which Paul talks about resurrection, what it means and why it is so important. Keep alert to this theme both here and elsewhere in the book.



What could this mean for me?

Paul is speaking to multiple groups, who are in conflict with each other, but who all believe themselves to be right.

As you read reflect on what we might still learn today about living with conflict.



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- Behind 1 Corinthians lies a great deal of division and conflict, did you learn anything from the epistle about how to handle conflict in our churches today?
- Spend some time talking about Paul's image of the Body of Christ in chapter 12. Is it an image you relate to? This image would have made a great amount of sense to a first century ad audience, is there an image that might make more sense to us today?
- How did you relate to chapter 15 and Paul's long discussion of resurrection? What do you think will happen after you die – does it match what Paul says or is it very different?
- If you want to you could also talk about what Paul says about women, men and the church in chapters 11 and 14. What do you think he was saying? What might that mean today?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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