SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians

Book Introduction and Reading Guide

SEVEN MARKS CHURCH

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Author, Date, and Title

Author: The Apostle Paul

Date: The apostle Paul wrote this letter to the church in Corinth while he was in Ephesus, likely around A.D. 53–55. Paul had spent about eighteen months helping establish the church (Acts 18), but after leaving, he received troubling reports about divisions, moral confusion, and questions that had arisen within the community. In response, he wrote this letter as both a pastor and an apostle, seeking to correct, encourage, and remind the Corinthians of the gospel that had first brought them to faith.

Title: The title "First Corinthians" simply reflects that this is the first of Paul's two letters to the Corinthians included in the New Testament. However, it was almost certainly not the first letter Paul ever wrote to them. Within 1 Corinthians, Paul refers to an earlier letter (5:9), and later writings suggest there were additional letters exchanged between Paul and the church that have not been preserved.

What we call 1 Corinthians is therefore best understood as one part of an ongoing pastoral conversation between Paul and a church he deeply loved.

Key Themes

Formation in Community

First Corinthians reminds us that becoming like Christ is rarely a solitary project. Again and again, Paul addresses the church as a community learning to follow Jesus together. The letter assumes that growth happens through relationships, shared worship, mutual encouragement, loving correction, and life in the body of Christ. Christian maturity is not simply personal; it is communal.

The Gospel Shapes Every Part of Life

The church in Corinth was asking questions about leadership, sexuality, worship, conflict, culture, spiritual gifts, and the future. Paul refuses to treat these as isolated issues. Instead, he continually brings the Corinthians back to the gospel of Jesus Christ, showing how Christ's death and resurrection reshape every

aspect of life together. Throughout the letter, Paul invites the church to see every question through the lens of the good news.

Unity Through the Cross

The Corinthians were divided by personalities, social status, spiritual gifts, and personal preferences. Paul reminds them that the church belongs to Christ alone and that the wisdom of the cross overturns the world's pursuit of status, power, and self-promotion. Christian unity is not built on sameness, but on a shared allegiance to Jesus.

The Church as the Body of Christ

Paul repeatedly reminds the Corinthians that they are not simply individuals who happen to gather together—they are the body of Christ, God's temple, and the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. Every member has been gifted for the good of the whole, and every gathering should strengthen, encourage, and build up the community in love.

Holy Lives in a Holy Community

The gospel does not merely forgive sin; it forms a new kind of people. Paul addresses questions of sexuality, marriage, conflict, freedom, and conscience to show that following Jesus changes how we live with our bodies, our relationships, and our freedoms. Christian maturity is measured not by knowledge alone, but by love expressed in everyday faithfulness.

Resurrection Hope

Paul concludes by reminding the Corinthians that the resurrection of Jesus is not simply one Christian doctrine among many—it is the foundation of the entire faith. Because Christ has been raised, death has been defeated, our bodies matter, our work is not in vain, and the future belongs to God. Resurrection is the hope that gives meaning to Christian life in the present.

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

Understanding **1 Corinthians** begins with understanding the world in which it was written. This is not a timeless essay on Christian theology, but a pastoral letter written to a real church facing real problems in a particular place and time. As we read, we are listening in on one side of an ongoing conversation between the apostle Paul and a church he dearly loved.

Corinth: A Crossroads of the Ancient World

Corinth was one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire. Situated on the narrow isthmus connecting mainland Greece with the Peloponnesian Peninsula, it became a thriving center of trade, commerce, travel, and culture. People from across the Mediterranean passed through the city, bringing with them different languages, customs, religions, and philosophies.

Temple of Apollo in Corinth, ca 540 BC, West facade

LIFE IN CORINTH WAS SHAPED BY:

- **Economic prosperity** through trade and commerce.
- **Cultural diversity**, with people from many nations and backgrounds.
- **Religious pluralism**, where the worship of many gods was woven into civic life, business, festivals, and everyday relationships.
- **Social ambition**, where status, influence, public reputation, and persuasive rhetoric were highly prized.

Into this bustling city came the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul and the Church in Corinth

Paul first arrived in Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18). There he met Priscilla and Aquila, fellow tentmakers who became close ministry partners. Together they helped establish a new Christian community, and Paul remained in the city for approximately eighteen months, teaching and strengthening the young church before continuing his missionary work.

Several years later, while serving in Ephesus, Paul began receiving troubling news from Corinth.

He learned that the church was struggling with:

- divisions and rivalries,
- sexual immorality,
- lawsuits between believers,
- confusion about marriage and singleness,
- questions about food sacrificed to idols,
- disorderly worship gatherings,
- misuse of spiritual gifts,
- misunderstandings about the resurrection.

At roughly the same time, the Corinthians also wrote Paul with a number of theological questions. The letter we know as 1 Corinthians is Paul's response to both the reports he received and the questions they asked.

The Purpose of the Letter

Although Paul addresses many different topics, they are all connected by a common concern.

The Corinthians had begun to think and live more according to the values of Corinth than the values of the kingdom of God.

Again and again, Paul reminds them that the gospel reshapes every part of life. Because they belong to Christ, they are called to become a different kind of community—one marked by humility instead of pride, holiness instead of compromise, love instead of self-interest, unity instead of division, and resurrection hope instead of worldly ambition.

Throughout the letter, Paul repeatedly calls the church to become what they already are:

- God's field
- God's building
- God's temple
- The body of Christ
- People called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ

Even when Paul's words are sharp, they are deeply pastoral. He loves this church and longs to see it become a faithful witness to the gospel in the midst of a complicated and often confusing culture.

The Fountain of Peirene at the archaeological site of Ancient Corinth

Corinth: Seeing the City

When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, he wasn't writing to a quiet village or a secluded religious community. He was writing to one of the busiest, wealthiest, and most influential cities in the Roman world.

Corinth sat on a narrow strip of land connecting northern and southern Greece. With two major seaports—one on the eastern side and one on the western—travelers and merchants from across the Mediterranean regularly passed through the city. Rather than sailing the dangerous waters around southern Greece, many ships unloaded their cargo at one port, transported it the few

miles across the isthmus, and continued their journey from the other side. This constant movement of people and goods made Corinth one of the great commercial crossroads of the ancient world.

If you lived in Corinth, your neighbors might have come from Rome, Greece, Egypt, Syria, or Asia Minor. You would hear different languages, encounter different customs, and interact with people from every level of society. Corinth was wealthy, ambitious, and remarkably diverse.

A Roman City with a Greek Soul

Although Corinth had been one of ancient Greece's most famous cities, it was destroyed by Rome in 146 B.C. After lying largely in ruins for more than a century, Julius Caesar refounded it as a Roman colony in 44 B.C.

By Paul's day, Corinth reflected both worlds. Roman law, government, and social customs shaped public life, while Greek language, philosophy, and culture remained deeply influential. The result was a city where multiple cultures overlapped and interacted every day.

Religion Was Everywhere

Religion in Corinth wasn't something people practiced only at a temple once a week.

Temples dedicated to many different gods stood throughout the city. Religious festivals shaped the civic calendar. Business associations, trade guilds, and social gatherings frequently included sacrifices to local deities. Public life, politics, commerce, and religion were tightly woven together.

For the first Christians, following Jesus wasn't simply a matter of attending church. It raised constant questions about how to live faithfully in a culture where religious practices touched nearly every part of daily life.

Status, Success, and Social Climbing

Corinth was also a city fascinated by success.

Traveling philosophers and professional speakers attracted large crowds, often charging admission for their performances and offering advice on how to gain influence, wealth, and honor. Public reputation mattered. Education mattered. Patronage mattered.

People carefully navigated social relationships in hopes of increasing their status.

That cultural backdrop helps explain many of the problems Paul addresses throughout the letter. The Corinthians were tempted to evaluate church leaders the same way they evaluated famous public speakers, to compete for recognition through spiritual gifts, and to measure success by the standards of the surrounding culture rather than by the wisdom of the cross.

Reading 1 Corinthians Today

The more we understand Corinth, the more familiar it begins to feel. It was a prosperous city marked by cultural diversity, competing worldviews, political influence, social ambition, religious pluralism, and confusion about sexuality and identity.

Into that world, Paul announced the good news of Jesus Christ and planted a community called to live differently—not by withdrawing from their city, but by becoming a people whose life together reflected the kingdom of God.

The bēma in Corinth, traditionally associated with Paul's appearance before Gallio in Acts 18.

Did you know?

Archaeologists can still visit the raised platform (bēma) in Corinth where Acts 18 records Paul standing before the Roman proconsul Gallio. Walking through the ruins today helps us remember that 1 Corinthians was written to real people living in a real city with real challenges.

Literary Features

Like every book of the Bible, 1 Corinthians has its own literary style and personality. Paying attention to a few recurring features will help you follow Paul's argument and better appreciate why he writes the way he does.

A Pastoral Letter

First Corinthians is a letter, not a systematic theology or a collection of timeless essays. Paul is writing to a real church facing real challenges, seeking to encourage, correct, and strengthen believers whom he deeply loves. While the letter teaches timeless truths about the Christian faith, those truths are always expressed within the concrete circumstances of the Corinthian church.

One Half of a Conversation

Perhaps the single most important thing to remember while reading 1 Corinthians is that we are listening to one side of an ongoing conversation.

Paul had already spent eighteen months with the Corinthians. He had written to them previously,

they had written back to him, and he had also received reports from trusted friends about what was happening in the church. As a result, Paul often addresses questions we never hear asked or responds to situations we can only partially reconstruct.

Rather than frustrating us, this invites us to read carefully, paying attention to the clues Paul leaves throughout the letter.

Corinthian Questions and Slogans

One of the ways Paul carries on this conversation is by quoting or alluding to statements that were circulating among the Corinthians.

At several points, Paul appears to repeat slogans, popular sayings, or ideas from the church before responding to them. This explains why some verses can seem surprising or even contradictory when read in isolation. As you read, ask yourself:

Is Paul making this statement—or responding to someone else's?

Scholars sometimes disagree about exactly where these quotations begin and end, but recognizing this conversational style helps explain many of Paul's arguments throughout the letter.

Scripture Interpreting Scripture

Paul constantly draws from Israel's Scriptures (our Old Testament). Sometimes he quotes directly; other times he alludes to familiar stories or images.

Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, the Psalms, and Israel's wilderness journey all appear throughout the letter. Rather than treating these as disconnected stories, Paul reads them as patterns that help the Corinthian church understand its own life and calling in Christ.

Watching for these connections helps us see how the gospel fulfills—and continues—the larger story of Scripture.

A Letter That Builds an Argument

Although 1 Corinthians addresses many different issues, it is much more than a collection of unrelated answers. Paul is carefully constructing a pastoral argument that

unfolds over the course of the entire letter.

Themes introduced early continue to develop as Paul moves from one topic to another. The wisdom of the cross becomes the lens through which Paul later discusses holiness, freedom, and resurrection. The divisions that fracture the church in the opening chapters reappear in conversations about lawsuits, the Lord's Supper, and spiritual gifts. Paul's vision of building up the body echoes from the beginning of the letter to the end.

As you read, pay attention to recurring ideas such as wisdom, judgment, holiness, freedom, love, unity, and resurrection. Rather than introducing new topics every few chapters, Paul continually revisits these themes, deepening and expanding them as the conversation unfolds. Reading larger sections at a time often helps us see these connections far better than reading isolated verses.

Strong Words from a Loving Pastor

Paul can sound remarkably direct—even sarcastic—at times. He rebukes, corrects, warns, and challenges the

Corinthians with unusual intensity.

Yet beneath every sharp word is the heart of a pastor. Paul is not trying to win an argument. He is trying to help a beloved church become what God has already declared it to be: the body of Christ, God's temple, and a faithful witness to the gospel in the midst of a complicated world.

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1 CORINTHIANS

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