



1 Corinthians

A Gifted Mess

1 Corinthians: A Gifted Mess

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Each lesson's Word Study segment obtains their definitions from the ESV with Strong's or The Lexham Research Commentary for 1 Corinthians (2013) or a combination of both.

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Recommended Resources

The Internet is great, but Googling for biblical research can lead you down strange paths. The following resources may be helpful for this study.

Olive Tree Bible App

This is one of the most accessible Bible apps available. It is available for smartphones and computers. The app itself is free and comes pre-loaded with several translations. If your preferred translation doesn't come with it, you can purchase your favorite Bible translation through their store, along with commentaries. A beneficial purchase would be a Strong's edition of your favorite translation (ex. ESV with Strong's).

Logos Bible Software – logos.com

Logos is the most comprehensive Bible software available. The Logos app is available for free and comes preloaded with the Lexham English Bible (LEB), but to access their vast library of resources, you will need a subscription.

ESV Bible – esv.org

This is the English Standard Bible (ESV) online. Signing up for a free account will give you access to various ESV Study Bible commentaries.

Blue Letter Bible – blueletterbible.org

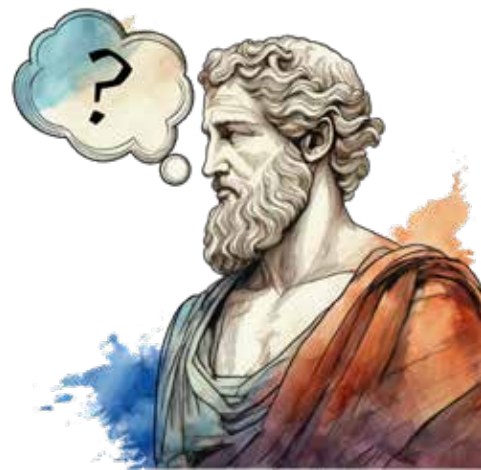
Blue Letter Bible (BLB) is both a website and an app for your smartphone. BLB offers free access to an enormous library of online resources.

Bibleref.com

Bibleref.com is a free online Bible study site. Some aspects of their site materials are still being developed, but eventually, you'll find book-by-book, chapter-by-chapter, and verse-by-verse commentary on the entire Bible.

All of these are **optional** for completion of this study. However, taking advantage of them will help you grow your research skills as you read your Bible.

Introduction



Have you ever wondered what it was like in the first-century church? How did they conduct their gatherings? What did their worship look like? Are we vastly different in how we do things, or do we retain some similarity with them? While it's not the same as traveling back in a time machine with a camera, the letters of the New Testament do give us clues.

Welcome to Corinth! Corinth was a strategic city for its culture and the provincial capital of Greece under Roman rule. Excavations in the area have revealed numerous temples and shrines dedicated to Apollo, Athena, Aphrodite, Sisyphus, and even the Egyptian gods of Isis and Serapis. It was also home to the Isthmian games, which took place twice a year and drew people from all over Greece.¹

The letters of 1 and 2 Corinthians offer detailed insider looks into what happened within one of the Apostle Paul's church plants. As you read through those letters, you'll find a simple truth. The Corinthian believers were both gifted and messy. They had issues, just like us, but the Lord graciously gifted them (1:4-9). This study will examine 1 Corinthians. A multitude of issues arose within that gifted congregation, several of which they did not handle well, which led to a series of letters from the man who planted their church.

First Corinthians was likely written around 54-56 AD while Paul was in Ephesus (16:8). We know this because solid archaeological evidence indicates that Gallio (Acts 18:12) became proconsul of Achaia in 51 AD.² The city itself was home to many freed slaves, retired military personnel, and a large Jewish community. For the ancient world, Corinth offered uncommon opportunities for economic mobility. This was due mainly to its position on the map, lying on major trade routes and having two important sea ports.

It's evident from reading 1 and 2 Corinthians that Paul wrote at least four letters to them. In 1 Corinthians 5:9, Paul mentions a former letter he had written prior to 1 Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians 2:3, he referred to a letter that might be 1 Corinthians, but many scholars believe it to be a letter written between 1 and 2 Corinthians. Unfortunately, these other two letters were lost to history and not believed to be divinely inspired.

¹ Beal, M. S. (2016). Corinth. In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.

² Brown, D. R., & Twist, E. T. (2013). 1 Corinthians (J. D. Barry & D. Mangum, Eds.). Lexham Press.

Key Players

Several names are mentioned within 1 Corinthians who played important roles in the formation of their church. Paul, of course, was the Apostle who planted, but he didn't do it alone. Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:2, 1 Cor 16:19) were instrumental in establishing the Corinthian church plant. Acts 18 details Paul's arrival in Corinth, his encounter with Aquila and Priscilla, and the events that led to the church's planting. Notably, Acts 18:11 says that Paul remained in Corinth for eighteen months.

Sosthenes is mentioned in the very first verse (1:1). There is some discussion concerning whether he contributed to the content of 1 Corinthians since Paul's opening implied this letter was from both of them. There's a good probability that he was the ruler of the synagogue in Corinth (Acts 18:17). It would seem that at some point before the Jews went to Gallio, Sosthenes believed the Gospel that Paul preached. This would explain why the Jews beat him in front of the tribunal after Gallio refused to stop Paul's preaching. After this, it seems Sosthenes joined Paul in Ephesus.

Apollos is another key name. Along with Peter (Cephas), he is mentioned as one of the teachers around whom factions had formed in the Corinthian congregation (1:12). Apollos was an eloquent and powerful teacher who received instruction from Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:24-28), and made his own journey to Corinth where he instructed them further after Paul had departed (Acts 19:1). Paul recognized the Lord's hand on his teaching and encouraged Apollos to return to Corinth (16:12).

Finally, there are Stephanas, Fortunatus, Achaïus, and Chloe. Paul called Stephanas' household the first converts in Achaia (16:15), meaning his household began the Christian community in Corinth. Chloe is an informant. She informed Paul of the divisions besetting their church (1:11). It seems that Chloe and Stephanas worked together to send a report of the dysfunction that had formed. Fortunatus and Achaïus (16:17) joined Stephanas on his journey to Ephesus (16:8), where Paul, Sosthenes, Aquila, and Priscilla were ministering.

Themes

It's difficult to nail down a single overarching theme for 1 Corinthians because the subject changes frequently. Perhaps the best characterization would be instructions for a healthy Christian community. Within that, Paul addresses five distinct problem areas.

- Factions – chapters 1-4
- Civic and Marriage Matters – chapters 5-7
- Christian Liberty and Conscience – chapters 8-10

- Gathered Worship – chapters 11-14
- Resurrection Theology – chapter 15

Why 1 Corinthians? //

It's easy to read about their issues and fail to recognize that we are them. We struggle with precisely the same things. Today's church is rife with division, sexual scandal, divorce, lawsuits, sensual behavior, stumbling blocks, a lack of brotherly love, misuse of spiritual gifts, and a broad ignorance of theology that goes well beyond the resurrection.

Like us, they faced matters of conscience, temptation, and opposition. The presence of so many temples dedicated to Roman and Egyptian gods created enormous social pressure to participate in festivals and observances that violated the conscience of many brothers in the Corinthian church. Some were saved Jews who objected to eating meat from the marketplace that had been sacrificed to idols (8:10-13). Other believers viewed their sexual appetites as unspiritual and merely matters of the body, so they participated in temple prostitution to curb the desires of the flesh (6:12-20). And then there was opposition. Early in the church's life, the Jews persecuted Paul and his teachings (Acts 18:12-17).

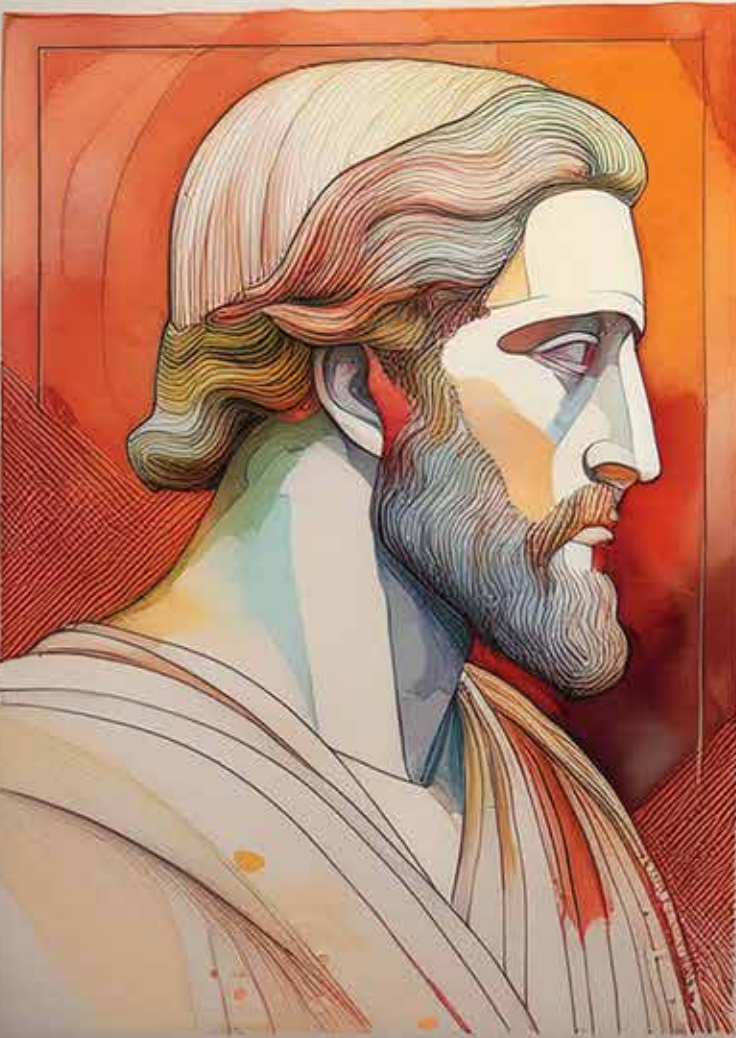
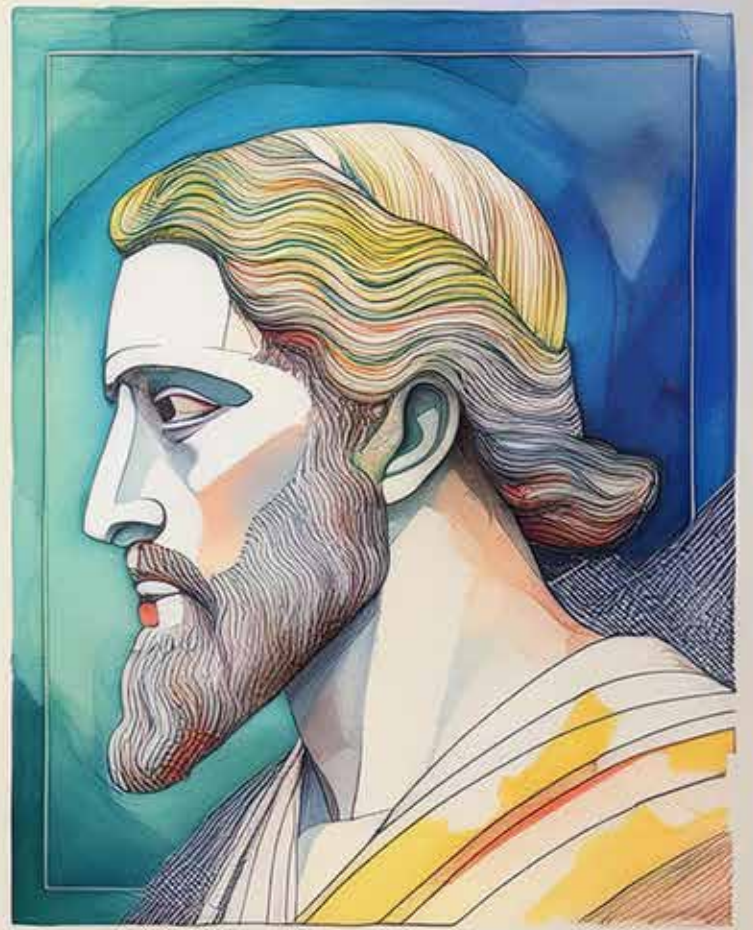
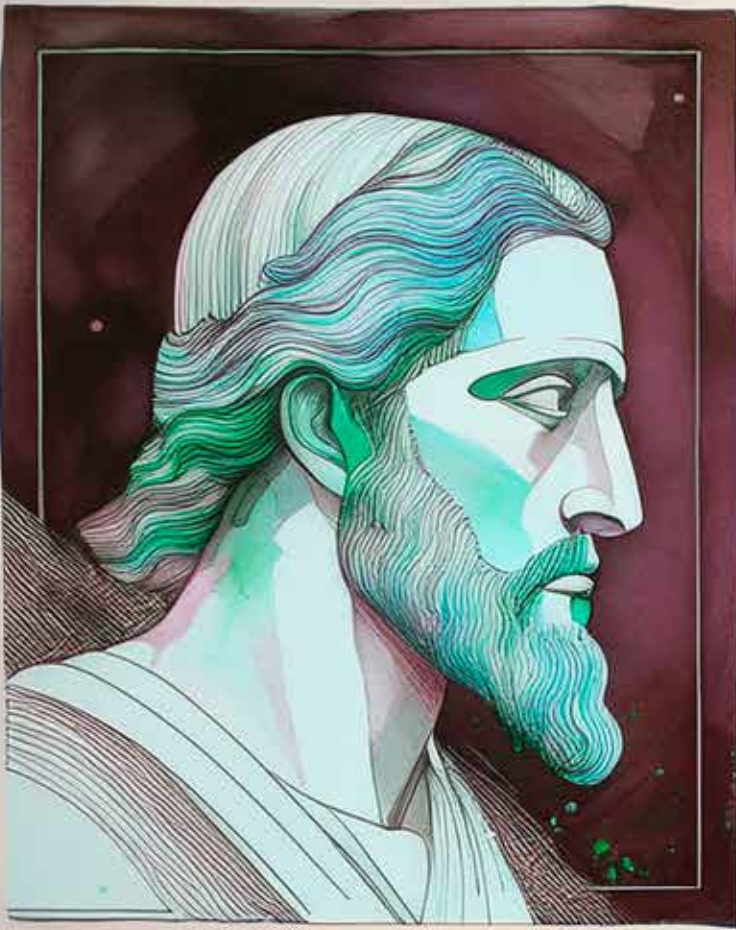
Sound familiar? Do we not face constant violations of our consciences? Are we not surrounded by sexual temptation? Is there not a persistent drumbeat of opposition to a biblical understanding of the world?

Revisiting this letter with fresh eyes and open hearts will do us well.



What do you hope to gain from this study? Use the remainder of this page to write down some goals for your journey.





"I appeal to you brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment."

"and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,"

"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

"For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power."

Here at the beginning, remind yourself that this is a letter. As a letter, it would have been read in its entirety by the elders of Corinth to their congregation. It would be a great idea to read the entire letter before starting this study. Don't fret over things that you don't understand; just read it, make little marks in your Bible next to verses that need clarification, then come back here. We'll get to them in due time.

The first four chapters of 1 Corinthians are largely characterized by the issue of factions within the church. Divisions around their favorite teachers arose between brothers. Immediately after saying hello, Paul began addressing this issue and concluded in chapter four by instructing us on how we should regard leaders. In between, Paul offered them several reminders.

- The Gospel is folly to the world.
- God chose foolish things to shame the wise.
- Understanding the Gospel requires the Holy Spirit.
- What is built will be tested and rewarded accordingly.
- He, and those who teach with him, are stewards of God's mysteries.



In this unit, ask the Lord an honest question: Have I caused harm or been a help when division has arisen in His church?



Greetings, Thanksgiving, & Unity {1:1-17}

"Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes," 1 Corinthians 1:1

In modern terms, the Apostle Paul was a church planter. The Lord called and gifted him to go to places where the Gospel had not been preached and establish local churches.¹ He typically traveled with companions — men like Timothy, Barnabas, Silas, and, in this case, Sosthenes. Corinth was one of them and perhaps the most famous (or infamous, depending on how you look at it). Often, the tendency is to read 1 Corinthians and marvel at their problems, perhaps even wonder whether these messed-up people were believers in the first place. We'll eventually arrive at issues that even the lost would condemn. How can any born-again person tolerate, much less commit, such sins within their church?

It's good for us that Paul, with no hint of sarcasm or cynicism, calls these men and women saints. We would do well to recognize and remember this as we start our journey.



What do the words *sanctified* and *saints* mean? (Use the recommended resources for this study to find the answer.) How do the definitions of these words help us understand our walk with the Lord?

¹ Romans 15:20

Enriched & Gifted

As in most of his letters, Paul expressed gratitude in the opening. Often, he is grateful for having heard good reports about their faith. For the Corinthians, he departed from his pattern. He was grateful for something more particular.

“that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge” 1 Corinthians 1:5

Paul was thankful for the work of God’s grace in their church, which enriched them in all speech and knowledge. It seems this enrichment was evident from a very early time in their spiritual lives. What did Paul mean by saying they were enriched in all speech and knowledge? Evidently, they quickly became verbally fluent in their faith, demonstrating their ability to speak easily and boldly while connecting and infusing it with their understanding of what they were being taught.

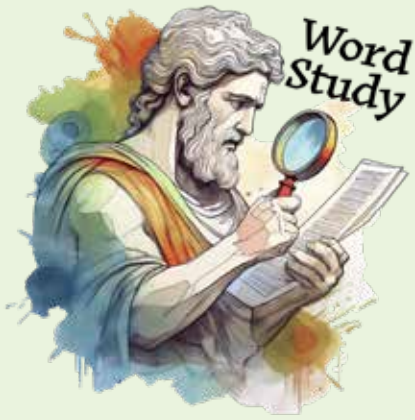
If Paul had a prototype church, Corinth would have been it. He spent eighteen months planting, carefully appointing elders, and teaching them. And he saw good fruit spring up quickly. They were taking the baton and running the race well! But that wasn’t all.

They didn’t lack any gifts (1:7). Because of God’s grace, which enriched them in all speech and knowledge, they lacked nothing in terms of spiritual gifts. Every spiritual gift necessary for the health and upbuilding of the church manifested when they gathered. Paul witnessed this with his own eyes, and he was grateful.

Paul expected these gifts of grace to continue until Jesus returned, but he quickly added that Christ sustains us (not the gifts). This is an important caveat in any discussion about spiritual gifts, which we’ll examine later in this study. But for now, it’s important to understand that though the Corinthians’ use of their spiritual gifts was problematic, the gifts themselves were a reason for Paul’s gratitude and that healthy churches are marked by their effective use.



Paul’s gratitude shows that Corinth had all the right stuff, but as we’ll find out, they were still making horrible decisions. How can a church with such a great foundation still make such a big mess?



Knowledge (1:5)

[Gnōsis (g-NOH-sis)]

Gnōsis appears no less than 28 times in the New Testament and has a range of meanings. Depending on the context, it can mean intellectual comprehension and intimate knowledge. One of the many concerns of 1 Corinthians is the misuse of knowledge. Some believers at Corinth claimed to have greater knowledge concerning whether meat sacrificed to idols should be eaten. Consequently, they caused those with less insight to stumble in their faith.²

Exhortations for Unity

"I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment." 1 Corinthians 1:10

Regardless of how well a church begins, how the members grow in grace and knowledge, or how the Holy Spirit manifests His gifts, the people are still being renewed daily. They still have residing sin that needs to be put to death. Even within this enriched and gifted congregation, problems arose.

Factions formed around favorite teachers. These favorite teachers also seem to have baptized many of their devotees. Beyond that, it's unclear what motivated the formation of these factions. There's nothing wrong with having a favorite teacher. If your church has multiple pastors, you may have a personal preference for the style of one over the other. But when preferences lead to division, something is off course. Paul turned their focus back to the centrality of Christ. None of these teachers died for them. They weren't baptized in any of their names. It is Christ who died, and it was into Him they were baptized.



While not all churches have multiple pastors, all Christians have access to a multitude of teachers and preachers via the Internet. Has this helped or harmed Paul's exhortation for unity within our churches?

²Brown, D. R., & Twist, E. T. (2013). 1 Corinthians (J. D. Barry & D. Mangum, Eds.; 1 Co 1:7). Lexham Press.

Ongoing Discussion

“(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)” 1 Corinthians 1:16

Don't let the parentheses fool you! Though this is a parenthetical remark in the middle of Paul's thoughts about baptism, it has become a go-to verse for many who argue in favor of infant baptism. Does the phrase "household of Stephanas" include children and infants in its meaning? Let's answer that question with more questions. Is that the question that Paul meant for his readers to ask? Is that the point that the Lord intended to make here? This highlights an appropriate topic that will be helpful for the remainder of our journey through 1 Corinthians.

Eisegesis vs. Exegesis. Have you heard of those terms? **Eisegesis** is the interpretation of a text (as of the Bible) by reading into it one's own ideas.³ **Exegesis** is an explanation or critical interpretation of a text.⁴ The former is marked by bringing your own values into the explanation of a text. The latter is marked by letting the text tell you what it values.

The New Testament more explicitly teaches that baptism follows one's initial belief in Christ and repentance. Therefore, the matter of a household being baptized possesses a built-in assumption from the other clear teachings of Scripture. That assumption is that each person in that household made a profession of faith, repented, and was then baptized. So, if Paul literally meant every person in Stephanas' home, then the biblical assumption is there were no infants, only parents and children (perhaps even servants) capable of expressing their own faith and repentance.

As we read the rest of this letter, we will do our best to exegete—discover the text's meaning, as the Holy Spirit and Paul intended—and adjust our own thoughts accordingly.



When we read the Bible, why is it important to exegete? Why should we refrain from letting our own ideas and experiences help interpret what we read?

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/eisegesis>

⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/exegesis>



The Cross is Foolish {1:18-31}

The first passage we examined ended with a peculiar statement: "...not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." The Corinthians were Greeks. Greeks placed a high value on oratory skills. They loved it when their teachers were eloquent and could create great turns of phrase as they spoke. This likely played some role in the divisions centering around teachers. But Paul responded that he was intentionally not eloquent. Why? If eloquence is what convinces you, it could also make you unconvinced. Paul wanted the simple Gospel to be enough, which sounded foolish to Greek ears. Simplicity was not viewed favorably.

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." – 1 Corinthians 1:18

The Offensive Gospel

From here, Paul began a brief exposition of how the Lord does things. If we were to build something, we'd seek out well-educated men with loads of experience. Not the Lord. He intentionally seeks out weak people. Through weak men and women, He builds his unshakeable, upside-down kingdom.

In some regard, the Gospel is a divine sieve. It conveys a simple message, yet the Lord uses its simplicity in an unexpected manner. Paul wrote that it is a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles (1:22). That's how the Lord intended it. While it is understandable, the Lord made it offensive, offending the religious sensibilities of Jews and the intellectual sensibilities of Gentiles.



Why does the Lord want weak people? Why did He make the Gospel offensive to basically everyone? If it's offensive to everyone, how is anyone saved?

A Kingdom of Fools

“But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;” – 1 Corinthians 1:27

It appears that some within these factions in the Corinthian church had begun to regard themselves too highly. Paul gave them a terse reminder, essentially saying don't forget where you came from. They weren't the cleverest or the most respectable, but the Lord called them out of darkness. In fact, to the rest of the world, believing the simple message of the Gospel made them look even more foolish.

To the world, we are a kingdom of fools. There's a sense in which the church in the West has tried to make herself appealing to outsiders. There have been movements within the church to be seeker-sensitive or culturally relevant. While the arguments for those movements have some merits, overall, the efforts have birthed a church that lacks spiritual depth and has little connection with the historical church.

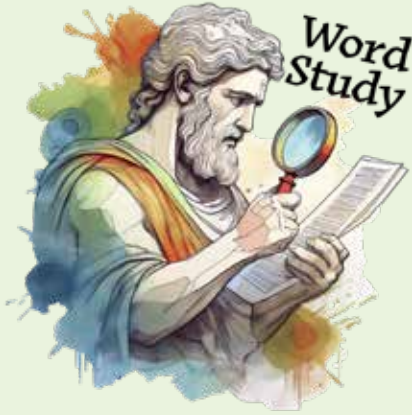
We've attempted to increase our cool factor by engaging the culture at the artistic level, creating whole industries concerned with Christian entertainment. Christian music even has an award called the Dove Award, which has now expanded into awarding faith-based movies and documentaries. It's the Grammys and Oscars wrapped into one trophy for Christian media.

But none of that has altered the opinions of the world. To them, we're still foolish. More than fools, increasingly, they see us as a problem to be silenced. The good news is that this is precisely how the Lord wants it. He intentionally chose what is low and despised to shame anyone who thinks he's smarter. He'll glorify Himself above anyone who would think to take glory for themselves by using foolishness to shame them.

“I am Yahweh; that is my name, and I do not give my glory to another, nor my praise to the idols.” – Isaiah 42:8 (LEB)



Why do so many believers want to make Christianity cool and relevant when the Lord intentionally chose us because we're patently uncool and weak?



Wisdom (1:21)

[Sophia (so-fee-ah)]

Sophia appears 49 times in the New Testament. Depending on the context, it is used to speak of any manner of wisdom, be earthly, demonic, or divine (see James 3:15). Paul's use in 1 Corinthians contrasts the wisdom of men and the wisdom of God. Human wisdom is so deficient that it cannot be used to comprehend the Lord (1:21). God's wisdom is so much higher, that His foolishness is wiser than the wisdom of men (1:25).

The Fool Will Die

"so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"
— 1 Corinthians 1:31

Even though Paul took a moment to remind them of their own foolishness, he followed it up with a message of encouragement. Indeed, although you may not have been wise by worldly standards, in Christ, you are being transformed. For every believer, Jesus becomes wisdom from the Lord, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. We don't muster those things for ourselves. We are powerless to achieve what Jesus does for us.

Stop and consider. Since Jesus becomes wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption for us, how should we judge ourselves when we don't see evidence of that transformation in our lives? If your confession of faith in Christ was authentic, and you were born again, there will be evidence of transformation because Jesus has now taken residence in your life via the Holy Spirit. Therefore, since all of this transformation is because of Jesus, you can't take an ounce of credit for any of it.



If the fool dies because Christ transforms him, do we have any role in this process? If so, what is it?

Ongoing Discussion

God may have chosen fools instead of the wise, but once He has His fool, He gradually makes him wise. If the fool must die, what takes his place, and how do we know if he is dying? James offers insights that help us know.

“But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and tell lies against the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.”
– James 3:14–15 (LEB)

There is an earthly, unspiritual, and demonic type of wisdom that arises from jealousy and selfish ambition. James further states that where this kind of wisdom is at work, there will be disorder and evil in play. Take a look at your circumstances. Are they characterized by chaos and disorder? Are you a calming influence in your relationships, or do you tend to stir things up? If you tend toward disorder and stirring things up, you do not possess the wisdom from above. The fool is not dying.

“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceful, gentle, obedient, full of mercy and good fruits, nonjudgmental, without hypocrisy, and the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace among those who make peace.”
– James 3:17–18 (LEB)

If the fool is dying, you will gradually be marked by these things. You will contribute more stability and calm to your circumstances, and you will cultivate and reap peace in all things. Why? Because the Holy Spirit is transforming you from the inside out.



What are some ways that the fool in you refuses to die?
What can you do now to become wiser in the Lord?



Power from the Spirit {2:1-5}

This will be the shortest portion of verses we'll deal with at once. What Paul said here speaks deeply into the heart of a Western church problem. We have largely fallen into the Corinthian error of loving teachers with great skill and impressive rhetoric. This has only increased with the spread of social media and the ability to view many different teachers whenever you like. So, let's examine what he told the Corinthian church and then reflect on ourselves to see if we're following his teaching.

Keep It Simple //

"And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom." – 1 Corinthians 2:1

Paul continued his thoughts from chapter one in that he purposefully presented his teaching in simple terms. He knew his approach needed to be distinct for people who loved eloquence and clever speech. His simplicity was designed to bother his listeners – not in a bad way, but in a curious way. Imagine Paul urging people passionately with simple words, straightforward messaging, a fantastical conclusion, and a challenge to reorient all of life around this good news. It sounded foolish, but in a way that intrigued people to hear more.

The word "lofty" carries the sense of superiority or elevation; a style designed to impress rather than illuminate. He rejected deliveries or vocabulary that would elevate him as an eloquent speaker. Though he was capable of robust theological discussion, he narrowed his presentation to "Jesus Christ and Him crucified"(2:2).



Does Paul's rejection of lofty speech and wisdom mean that we too should narrow our message to only Christ crucified? If so, do apologetics and philosophy have any significance to evangelism?

When We Are Weak //

In addition to his choice to keep things simple, Paul said that he was with them in “weakness and in fear and much trembling.” What does that mean? Was Paul sick? Was he frightened? Acts 18 gives us insight.

“And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.’”
– Acts 18:9–10

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he did what he always did: he went to the synagogue and began reasoning with the Jews (Acts 18:4). However, in this case, when they rejected him, Paul declared judgment on them and resolved to go to the Gentiles with the Gospel. At some level, it seems that though Paul was having success among the Gentiles, he lived in fear of reprisal from the Jews. And who could blame him? That’s the pattern that he had experienced in other cities.

However, more than that, I think Paul was using his own weakness, fear, and trembling as an object lesson for what he’d already said in 1:27. The Lord chooses the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

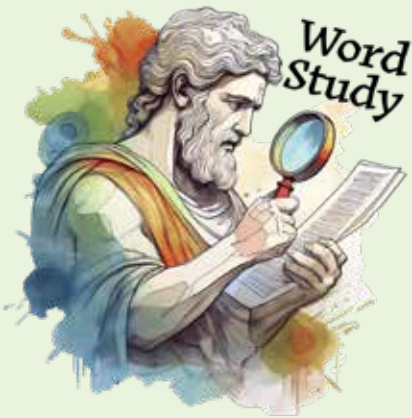


Has the Lord ever humbled you by using someone else’s weakness? Has the Lord ever used your weakness to humble someone else?

Demonstration Not Explanation //

“and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,” – 1 Corinthians 2:4

Paul’s simple method didn’t use persuasive speech. When he said he didn’t use “plausible words of wisdom,” he meant that his simple Gospel message wasn’t without support. When we share something we experienced, we often support it with eyewitness accounts. If you teach, you’ll likely support your teachings with references to other trusted sources. While we don’t know precisely what Paul said, we can make fair



Power (2:4) [*dynamis* (doo-na-mees)]

Dynamis appears 115 times in the New Testament. In the ESV, it is translated as “works” (Matt 11:21), “ability” (Matt 25:15), “mighty” (Mark 6:5), “miracles” (Acts 8:13), “meaning” (1 Cor 14:11), and “strength” (2 Cor 1:8), but it is mostly translated as “power.” Its root meaning is “force,” and in the New Testament, it is usually associated with miraculous ability, strength, or works. It is the Greek word from which we derive our terms “dynamic” and “dynamite.”

assumptions that he wasn’t relying on other philosophers and teachers to give credence to his teachings. Instead, his support was from a “demonstration of the Spirit and of power.”

Explanation alone does not suffice. That’s not to suggest that the Gospel is lacking. The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. But the Holy Spirit affirms the Gospel’s authenticity through demonstrations of power. His involvement is an integral part of the Gospel. At Pentecost, Peter appealed to the prophet Joel to explain what was happening.

“And it will happen afterward thus: I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your elders will dream dreams; your young men shall see visions.” – Joel 2:28 (LEB)

When we are born again, the Holy Spirit takes residence within us, and there will be evidence of His presence. Joel prophesied that all people, both men and women, would prophesy, indicating that everyone—not just the prophets—would receive the Spirit and show evidence! This evidence is the demonstration that Paul spoke of. We will learn later that there are many manifestations of the Spirit, beyond prophesying, that come forth.



What demonstration makes us uniquely Christian? Has the Gospel produced evidence in your life that cannot exist apart from the Holy Spirit’s activity?

Why Demonstration? //

“so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” – 1 Corinthians 2:5

The reason is simple. Paul didn't want anyone to say they were a Christian because he convinced them. He didn't want it to be about his rhetoric or his thorough explanation. He wanted people to believe because of the Lord's power. That can't be achieved through words. Words are cheap. Again, the Corinthians loved words. Paul wanted their belief to be rooted in something greater: the power of the Spirit.

Is this missing? Has the evangelical church minimized the demonstration of the Spirit to the point of losing a crucial aspect of the Gospel? This isn't about pursuing signs and wonders. It's about expecting evidence that can only be explained by the power of the Holy Spirit. Could it be that professing Christians who “deconstruct” leave the faith simply because there was nothing supernatural about their practices? Because Corinth was so enamored with eloquent rhetoric, Paul was concerned they might make a false profession of faith. Therefore, he sought to accompany his preaching with demonstrations of the Holy Spirit's power.



Paul wasn't campaigning against good speaking skills. Where do we cross the line and depend too much on our ability to deliver a well-crafted presentation instead of demonstrating the Spirit's power?

Ongoing Discussion //

There is reason for discernment when it comes to expecting evidence. Expecting evidence can become seeking signs and wonders. Some movements within the church emphasize signs and wonders, and if there are none, the assumption is that the Lord isn't moving. They wrongly apply passages about miracles and treading on serpents as the normative expectation for Christian experiences.

The problem with seeking signs and wonders is that it looks outward. It depends on something happening outside as evidence of the Spirit's power. When we always look outward, we neglect the inward.

Expecting evidence starts inside. What is supernatural about our private lives? What about our inner lives can only be explained by the Holy Spirit's activity? Answering these appropriate questions helps us determine whether our salvation is secured in God's power and not in the wisdom of men.

"Therefore we do not lose heart, but even if our outer person is being destroyed, yet our inner person is being renewed day after day."

- 2 Corinthians 4:16 (LEB)



In light of Paul's teaching in this short passage, how should you reevaluate your profession of faith?

What You Should Know //

Paul intentionally embraced a simple presentation for one purpose. He didn't want to impress the Corinthians with his impressive oratory skills. Instead he kept it simple and demonstrated the Holy Spirit's power in their midst. Demonstration undergirds explanation. Paul knew that leading people to the Lord with impressive arguments might cause false conversion. He ensured that their faith rested in God's power instead of a persuasive teaching.

- Paul's message was intentionally simple. (2:2)
- A convincing teaching should be accompanied by a demonstration of the Spirit's power. (2:4)
- Faith should rest in God's power, not skillful arguments. (2:5)
- When the Holy Spirit is resident, there should be evidence of His power. (Joel 2:28)





Wisdom from the Spirit {2:6-16}

Most people are familiar with the concept of age-appropriate content, which is why movies receive ratings. Rated R means children under 17 must be accompanied by a parent. Parents (hopefully) censor what they say around their younger kids to protect their innocence. We don't speak about certain subjects with children who don't understand how to process the content.

*“Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away.”
– 1 Corinthians 2:6*

Maturity Required

Similarly, Paul seems to have practiced maturity-based content. He knew some matters were reserved for the mature, which would only confuse the immature. Starting in verse six, it's as if he told the Corinthians how he'd like to speak, but then, in chapter three (3:1), he stated he couldn't because they were immature.

At a practical level, it would be very difficult to figure out who can handle what, but broadly speaking, the theology we teach to teens will be of a different magnitude than what you'd hear discussed in a college course on the Pauline letters. So, Paul made this distinction: some things can only be handled by the mature. There is a clear command for us to press on to maturity; to remain immature is disobedient (Heb 6:1). The hope is that as spiritual milk is consumed, there will be a steady transition to spiritual meat. This transition happens as we feed maturity-appropriate content, in the hope that the Lord will provide the growth.



What might result from going too deep with a young or immature believer?

Hidden Wisdom

“But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.” – 1 Corinthians 2:7

Paul’s use of the words “secret” and “hidden” has caused some to make errors (which we’ll address in the Ongoing Discussion), but they really shouldn’t because he explains his meaning in the following verses.

Let’s address a couple of clarifying questions. First, who are the rulers of this age? In the Ephesian letter, Paul used the Greek term archon to refer to Satan, the prince of the power of the air (Eph 2:2). He also used it to describe rulers in government (Romans 13:3). It’s not clear which meaning is intended here. However, we can perhaps safely assert that both interpretations apply, considering that demonically influenced human rulers in government and religion crucified Jesus. Neither Satan, Pilate, nor the Jewish authorities understood that Christ’s crucifixion was part of the Lord’s plan.

The second question is somewhat answered by the first. What was the Lord’s secret and hidden wisdom? That Christ must be crucified to complete His work of redemption. For sin and death to be defeated, the perfect Lamb of God had to be slain. If Satan had known that his defeat was in Christ’s death, he would not have driven the earthly rulers to crucify Him. If the earthly rulers had understood that Jesus was the Messiah, they would never have crucified Him. It was hidden from both parties so that the Father’s plan could be accomplished.



How do we reconcile the actions of Satan, the Romans, and the Jews with the Lord’s sovereign plan to crucify His Son? If it was the Lord’s plan, are they responsible?

Revealed Wisdom

“these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.” – 1 Corinthians 2:10

The frequent misuse of verse nine to discuss heaven likely indicates a misunderstanding of Paul’s message. What does he mean? Look at verse ten. “These things” refers to the hidden wisdom of the Lord. He repurposed Isaiah 64:4 to explain that no one could have known the Lord’s plan. One contention with Paul’s quotation is that it doesn’t actually read that way in Isaiah. This has been widely discussed, dating back to some of the earliest Christian authors. It’s either a paraphrase of Isaiah 64:4 or a combination of several verses that convey similar ideas. Regardless, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul stated, “as it is written,” so whether it’s a paraphrase or a combination, it’s from the Word.

Strange quotations aside, the point is this: although the plan was hidden from some, the Holy Spirit reveals “these things” to believers. The secret and hidden wisdom that no eye can see, no ear can hear, and no heart can imagine is disclosed to those who receive the Holy Spirit through salvation. How? Because the Spirit knows the depths of God and aids us in understanding as we mature in Christ!



Since one of the works of the Holy Spirit is to disclose the secret wisdom of God to believers, should we measure our spiritual growth by the depth of how we understand and apply the Gospel?

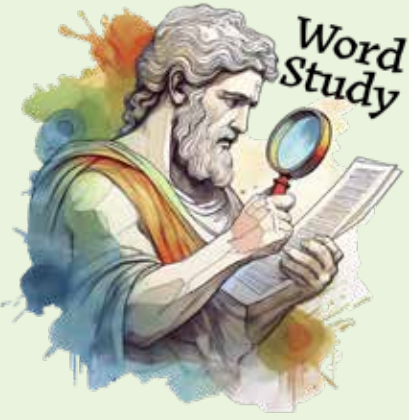
Natural Indicators

“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” – 1 Corinthians 2:14

The Holy Spirit interprets spiritual truth for spiritual people (2:13), implying that even the youngest in the faith can understand foundational truths. When people do not understand spiritual truth, two possibilities exist: They have not matured enough or do not have the Spirit at all and cannot understand.

In the case of immaturity, understanding deeper spiritual truth often requires time and experience in the faith. We shouldn’t expect infants to walk before they crawl. In the other case, the person isn’t saved and lacks the Holy Spirit altogether. They are still their “natural” selves and will not understand until they are saved and receive the Spirit.

Believers are caught between the tension of responding to circumstances the way the natural person – the flesh – would or the way the Holy Spirit leads us as we grow in understanding the Word. This is the process of



Spiritual (2:15)

[*pneumatikos* (noo-mah-ti-kohs)]

Pneumatikos appears 21 times in the New Testament. As a noun it is mostly associated with the Holy Spirit, in 1 Corinthians 12:1, pneumatikos was translated “spiritual gifts” but it can also be rendered “spiritual people.” Holy Spirit gifts/people is the intended meaning. As an adjective, 1 Corinthians 10:3 used pneumatikos to describe the Israelites’ wilderness food and drink- “spiritual food, spiritual drink,” indicating their source was from the Holy Spirit.

sanctification, where we put to death the desires of the flesh and walk with the Spirit. Therefore, in a sense, we become more responsible for our actions than the lost simply because the Holy Spirit helps us know better, giving us the mind of Christ (2:16).



Verse fifteen instructs us that believers should not subject themselves to the judgments of the world. How do we reconcile that with being at peace with everyone (Rom 12:18) and having a good reputation with outsiders (1 Tim. 3:7)?

Ongoing Discussion

Since Paul imparted secret and hidden wisdom from God, this is a great place to mention Gnosticism. Gnosticism is a movement that arose in the second century A.D., and its adherents believed salvation from the fallen physical world was achieved through obtaining secret knowledge, or **gnosis**.¹ In some aspects, Gnostics sounded Christian and gained influence among believers, but the early church fathers condemned this as heresy.

Gnosticism still influences us today, but it has been rebranded. Movements in today’s church make similar claims to those of the Gnostics; they receive visions and dreams that provide special revelations, unlocking spiritual understanding and gifts. They use this knowledge to teach others to seek special revelations from the Lord so that they, too, can gain a deeper understanding. Beware of any movement that emphasizes

¹ Smith, Z. G. (2016). Gnosticism. In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.

such practices. They take legitimate experiences from Scripture—dreams and visions—and misuse them to construct false teachings that attract a following, creating haves and have-nots within the Kingdom.

However, to avoid Gnosticism, we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater. The temptation is always to go too far. Since Gnostics value dreams, visions, and special knowledge, many reject all of it. But that's like cutting off a hand when you only need to bandage your pinky finger. All we need to do is be discerning. Is it easier to just say to take your experiences elsewhere? Of course. Is it biblical? Not in the least. Paul instructed the Thessalonians to test everything and hold fast to what is good (1 Thess. 5:21). Being dismissive is not the same as testing.



How do we test everything? How do you handle someone's experience that doesn't pass the test?

What You Should Know ///

Maturity is required for wisdom. There is a persistent theme in the Word for the Lord's people to press on toward maturity. As we do, the Holy Spirit reveals the Lord's "secret and hidden wisdom" to our hearts. The natural man can't understand spiritual truth, while the Spirit interprets spiritual truth to those who are spiritual. When we don't understand spiritual truth, only two possible reasons exist. Either we aren't maturing, or we haven't been born again.

- The Lord's wisdom is secret and hidden from those who don't have the Holy Spirit. (2:7)
- The Holy Spirit reveals the Lord's secret and hidden wisdom to believers as we mature. (2:9-10)
- Failure to understand spiritual truth is evidence that we are immature or unsaved. (2:12)
- We have been given the mind of Christ, so that by the Spirit we can understand the Lord's will. (2:16)





Build Carefully {3:1-23}

"But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ." – 1 Corinthians 3:1

The Root Issue *////////////////////*

If you pay close attention, Paul uncovers the root issue of everything he addresses in this letter within the first four verses. That root is immaturity. Immaturity isn't complicated. When someone is immature, they behave in a manner that is beneath their age, education, or experience. In this case, the Corinthian believers weren't behaving according to how Paul instructed them, nor by how far along they should have been had they continued in his teaching after he departed.

Paul made an interesting observation about this. He asked rhetorical questions to cast light on the nature of their immaturity. He pointed out that jealousy and strife only revealed that they were still in the flesh and acting like humans. Their divisions only showed that they were "being merely human" (3:4).

The accusation of "being merely human" highlights an oft-overlooked reality. Born again people are becoming more than human. In Christ, we might say we're becoming human 2.0 (2 Cor 5:17).



If jealousy, strife, and divisions are all hallmarks of being merely human, how would you grade our efforts at being the new humans that Jesus died to create?

Fellow Workers

“What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.” – 1 Corinthians 3:5

The reality that made the Corinthians’ immature behavior so evident was that they formed fan clubs around fellow workers instead of the Lord, who gave the growth. Paul portrayed himself and Apollos as two men working in the field, each with a different role. One planted, one watered, but both were mere servants. It was the Lord who caused growth to happen. If you perceived that your faith grew while Apollos was ministering, don’t credit that growth to Apollos. It is the Lord and Him alone who caused that growth.

Let’s not minimize the fact that the Holy Spirit gifts people to teach and preach. They must obey and nurture that gift. But preachers and teachers never cease to be ditch diggers. The Lord appoints these gifts to His church; they must be faithful to nurture their calling, and we must be faithful to the One who appointed them.

Paul planted, Apollos watered, but Paul said that they were one (3:8). This doesn’t imply that their roles don’t matter. Their roles are tied intimately to their individual gifts. Apollos was a gifted teacher, but Paul was set apart as an apostle, one who pioneered the spread of the Gospel to new places. Rather, it means that they played equal parts. Their roles are “interdependent and complementary”¹, and they will both be rewarded according to their labor (3:8).



How does the interdependent and complementary nature of Paul and Apollos’ roles help us understand the broader issue of gifts within the body of Christ?

Build With Care

“According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.” – 1 Corinthians 3:10

¹ Brown, D. R., & Twist, E. T. (2013). 1 Corinthians (J. D. Barry & D. Mangum, Eds.; 1 Co 3:5–9). Lexham Press.

Verses ten through fifteen are often cited to support the notion that every believer will stand before the Lord to be judged on the basis of their works. While this is a reasonable interpretation of the passage, it doesn't fully capture what Paul intended. When we exegete these verses in the context of the broader discussion, it becomes clear that the individuals being judged by fire are teachers.

Take a look at verse nine: "We are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building." The fellow workers are those who build on the foundation, illustrating the stricter judgment of teachers that James referred to.

"My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment." – James 3:1 (NKJV)

Now, this also applies to all believers. We are all given spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:11) and are all given works prepared in advance to walk in (Eph 2:10). We will experience a day of reckoning before the Lord over how we used the gifts He gave us to accomplish the works He prepared for us. However, in this case, Paul's intention was to warn builders/teachers who would build on the foundation he laid. Therefore, the broader application for all believers is secondary. That doesn't make it less important; it only means that the original intent was aimed at specific people in the church: teachers. And they will endure a stricter judgment than their fellow believers.

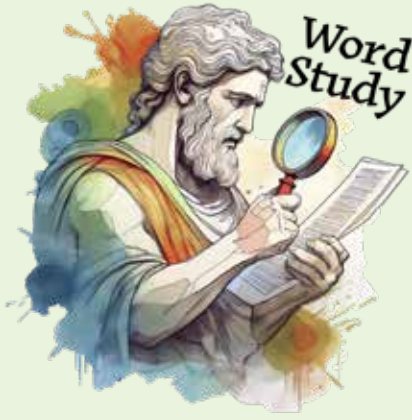


Take a moment and reflect on your life. Would you say you are living out your faith as one who knows the Lord will hold them accountable?

Handle With Care //

"If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple." – 1 Corinthians 3:17

Take another look at verse nine: "You are God's field, God's building." This helps clarify verse sixteen, which uses the plural "you." You are God's temple. Later in this letter, Paul states that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19), but at this point, he's referring to the entire congregation. Together, we are God's field,



Servants (3:5)

[*diakonos* (dee-ah-ko-nohs)]

Diakonos appears 27 times in the New Testament. The ESV translates it as “attendant,” “servant,” “minister,” and “deacon.” The majority of the time, it appears as “servant.” In the context of 1 Corinthians 3, it isn’t used to indicate an office like deacon, but in a broader sense of fellow-workers. Paul reasoned that neither he nor Apollos were better, but were both servants, and God is who causes their growth.

His building, His temple. This makes the gathering of the saints a sacred matter and clarifies why we are instructed not to neglect our assemblies (Heb 10:24-25).

Due to the sacred nature of the congregation, anyone who intentionally divides her – destroys God’s temple – is in danger of his own destruction. This is a stern warning to those who build, and more broadly, anyone who would stir up division over anything. God’s temple is holy. Profaning it comes with consequences.

For the remainder of this chapter, Paul shifts back to the congregation. Don’t boast in men. Don’t divide yourselves according to your favorite teachers. Think maturely. If your teachers think they’re wise, God will humble them. If you think you are wise for picking the right faction, you’ll also get humbled. “He catches the wise in their craftiness.”

Don’t boast in men. Why? Because you already possess everything you need. All things are yours, regardless of who you are in Christ. We have all things in Him, and He is in the Father. Peter echoes a similar sentiment.

“because his divine power has bestowed on us all things that are necessary for life and godliness, through the knowledge of the one who called us by his own glory and excellence of character,” – 2 Peter 1:3 (LEB)



When you attend worship with your church, do you consider the congregation sacred? Do you think of the gathered church as the Lord's temple?

Ongoing Discussion

“If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” – 1 Corinthians 3:15

Verse fifteen continues to be a source of discussion. What does Paul mean by this? This is tied to the subject of rewards in heaven. Jesus taught us that we should not store treasure on earth where thieves, moths, and rust can destroy it, but we should store it in heaven (Matt 6: 19-20). It appears here that if we build carelessly, we will suffer loss.

Are we losing rewards? If so, how did we store those rewards in the first place if our work was careless? Paul clearly says this isn’t a loss of salvation because “he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” So, the person who suffers losses isn’t losing salvation but something is clearly lost. What is it? It would seem that Paul suggests they’ll show up in the new heaven and earth smelling like smoke but safely in.

This is a complex subject, and there are varied thoughts. Some say that the loss is evident when we become aware of the rewards we could have obtained. Others say that it concerns our granted authority in the new creation and cite that those who are faithful with little will be faithful with much (Luke 16: 10).



Should Christ’s promise of rewards be the motivator for faithfulness, or should Christ alone motivate us? If Christ alone, why do you think He mentioned the rewards at all?

What You Should Know

Paul was blunt. He could not address the Corinthians as spiritual people because they were still behaving in the flesh as mere humans. Their factions around teachers proved their immaturity. The teachers that Christ gives His church are fellow servants with those who are taught. It is the Lord who should be honored. And when teachers stand before the Lord, it is His judgment that will reveal the quality of their work. Those who would create division in the church should beware. The Lord will judge you. Instead humble yourself and do not boast in men, but only in the Lord.

- Walking in the flesh is being “merely human.” (3:4)
- The teachers that the Lord gives His church are fellow servants. (3:7-8)
- The Lord’s judgment will reveal the quality of our work. (3:13)
- The local church is God’s temple because His Spirit dwells in us. (3:16)
- Remain humble and embrace your low estate so that the Lord might make you wise. (3:18)



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Regarding Leaders {4:1-20}

Since the beginning of the letter, Paul has addressed the problem of factions within the Corinthian church centered around their favorite teachers. There was team Paul, team Apollos, and team Cephas, probably among others. He reminded them that the Lord chose to use foolish things to shame the wise (1:27), pointed them to the simple Gospel and the Spirit's power (2:4), exhorted them to grow up (3:1), and emphasized that he and the other men they idolized were fellow servants (3:9). Essentially, he instructed them on how not to regard himself, Apollos, and Cephas. In this chapter, Paul addressed how he and his fellow teachers and apostles should be regarded and concluded his remarks on this matter.

"This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." – 1 Corinthians 4:1

Faithful Stewards

Paul spent a great deal of time leveling the playing field in chapter three. He spoke of himself and Apollos as fellow servants so that the Corinthian believers wouldn't elevate one of them above the other but instead give glory to the Lord, who gives them all things. Yet here, Paul distinguished those who teach. They are indeed servants, but they have also been entrusted with the mysteries of God. This distinction indicates that he and Apollos (and anyone who teaches) were gifted to teach and explain the Scriptures faithfully in addition to serving.

As stewards of the Lord's mysteries, they must be faithful men (4:2). This fidelity extends beyond faithfulness to their spouses. The whole of their character must be trustworthy. Are they reliable in all circumstances? Is their yes, yes, and their no, no? Are they faithful to the Apostle's and Prophet's teachings without straying into the doctrines and traditions of men?



The Lord gives His church teachers, which implies they are necessary for our spiritual health. How should they lead us in our spiritual growth? How should we regard their instruction?

Humble Stewards

“For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.” – 1 Corinthians 4:4

Paul had a circumspect understanding of his ministry. At the same time, he recognized that he was a sheep just like the others, but also that the Lord had called him to be an Apostle. Because of this, the judgments of other sheep didn’t trouble him. He was confident in his calling, yet not so confident that he believed he could do no wrong. He refused even to judge himself (4:3). This demonstrates that Paul knew the depth of his sin. He understood that even his best evaluation of his motives would fall short. Just because he couldn’t detect something didn’t acquit him. The Lord is the one who knows our motives, and His judgment is what matters.

So, rather than concern himself with the judgments of others or even his own, he looked ahead to the eschatological judgment of the Lord, where every motive of the heart will be brought to light. Knowing that judgment lay ahead, he served with humility. Now, that doesn’t let the Corinthians (or us) off the hook for making righteous judgments in the here and now. Later, we will indeed see Paul render judgment against persons in their congregation for their outrageous sins. However, the judgments at stake here are against matters of motive, not commandment. The Lord “will disclose the purposes of the heart” (4:5).



Since only the Lord knows the purposes of the heart, how important is it that we cultivate a relationship with the Holy Spirit, who “searches everything, even the depths of God” (2:10)?

Divine Hyperbole

“We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute.”
– 1 Corinthians 4:10

Paul reminded the Corinthians, with words infused with sarcasm and hyperbole, that anyone who follows Christ will seem foolish and be marked by suffering. However, though it is rightly called hyperbole, in Paul’s life, the hyperbole is closer to the truth. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-28, he outlined a staggering list of sufferings he had endured up to that point in his life. Throughout the history of the church, many Christians have suffered greatly for the Gospel. However, for every believer whose extraordinary suffering has made it into the history books, there are countless believers who endured very ordinary suffering.

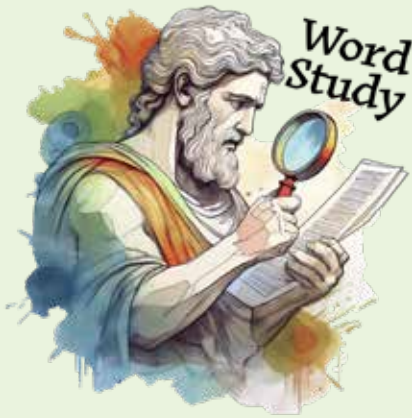
All Christian suffering begins with denial of the flesh. Level one is you simply refuse to indulge in the sinful desires of your old self. Suffering begins there. From there, if your denial makes the people around you bristle and you become the target of their ire, their jokes, their ridicule, that’s level two suffering. If you endure through level two, and start bringing light into the lives of those who persecute you, perhaps then you’ll start drawing the fire of the spiritual powers who are invested in keeping the world in darkness. That’s level three.

Paul remarked that the Lord had made His Apostles seem the most foolish, making them a “spectacle” for everyone on earth and in heaven to witness. Everyone who serves the Lord will appear undignified in the eyes of the world. We, along with Paul and the Apostles, will become Exhibit A in His case against Satan and those divine beings who followed him in rebellion. His church – His family of fools – will be the “spectacle” by which the Lord reveals His many-sided wisdom to all of creation, both seen and unseen (Ephesians 3:10).

“in order that the many-sided wisdom of God might be made known now to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places through the church,”
– Ephesians 3:10 (LEB)



How does/will the spectacle of our suffering make the Lord’s many-sided wisdom become evident?



Mysteries (4:1)

[*mystērion* (mee-STAIR-ree-on)]

Mystērion appears 27 times in the New Testament. The ESV translates it as “secret,” and “mystery.” The majority of the time, it appears as “mystery.” Unlike our modern usage of the word, Paul’s usage is typically tied to knowledge that had been concealed up until the present, but was being revealed by the Spirit (2: 10). Paul and Apollos were both considered stewards of the Lord’s mysteries because they were appointed to teach what the Spirit was revealing.

Imitate Me

“I urge you, then, be imitators of me.” – 1 Corinthians 4:16

Has anyone ever started a conversation with you by saying, “No offense,” or, “I’m not trying to be mean,” or, “You know I love you”? You know what that means. Brace yourself! Paul did the opposite. He spoke sharply to them, then followed it with, “I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.” That’s Paul’s version of “no offense.”

His point, though, was well taken. They were essentially his church kids. He planted the church and was instrumental in discipling them through the earliest times of their spiritual lives. He appointed their elders and even sent Timothy to them while he was absent. He was a spiritual father to them. He wanted them to imitate his faith and practice and grow up into Christ as he had.

We still need spiritual fathers. Spiritual fathers are the builders that Paul referenced in chapter three. They are individuals the Lord provides to every church to teach and shepherd the flock. While spiritual fathers aren’t limited to just pastors in the church, you cannot be a spiritual father while teaching poorly. In this context, spiritual fathers have their spiritual ducks in a row. Their beliefs and practices are worthy of imitation.

Paul’s admonition to imitate him isn’t in a vacuum. He has been clear all along with them that the evidence of his message and authority aren’t from his words alone. He demonstrated the power of the Holy Spirit in their midst. He’s not a talk-only kind of apostle. We shouldn’t imitate men and women who possess no evidence

of the Spirit's power. In fact, Paul pointed out that when the Lord allowed him to return, he would test those who were arrogant, not by what they teach, but by their power (4:19).

*"For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power."
– 1 Corinthians 4:20*



If Paul came to you and tested your claims by the evidence of the Spirit's power, how would you fare?

Ongoing Discussion

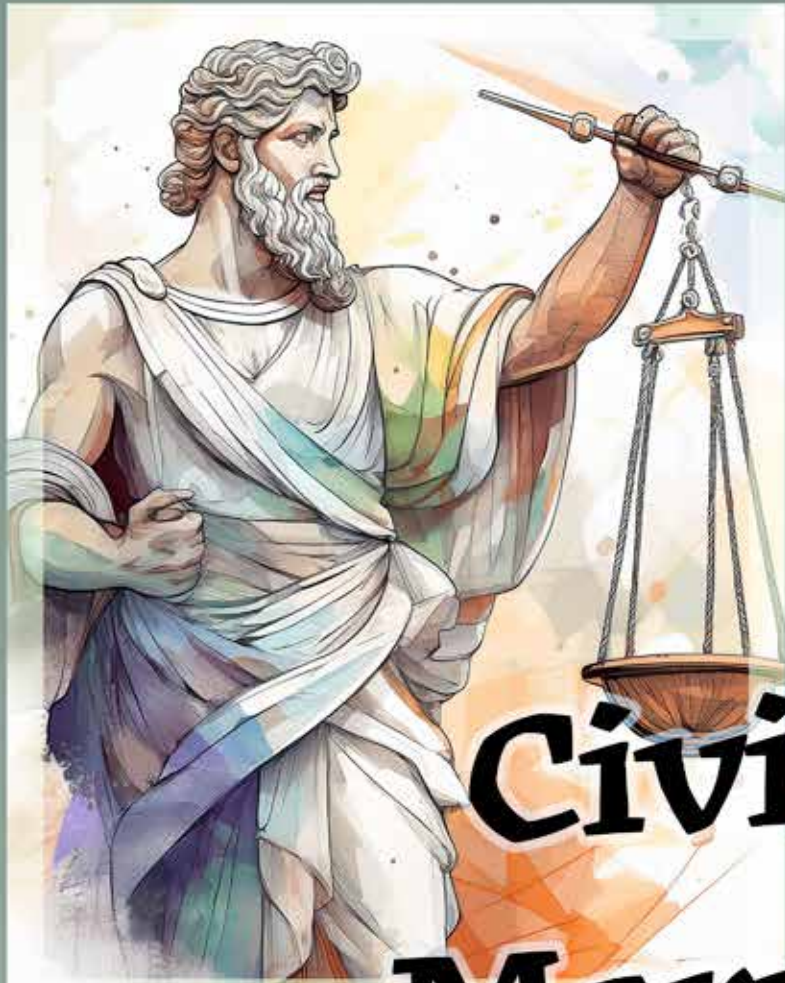
*"I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another."
– 1 Corinthians 4:6*

There is a dangling matter that we can investigate for ongoing discussion. Verse six admonishes the Corinthians not to go beyond what is written. Anthony Thiselton's commentary on 1 Corinthians (2000) contains seven possible interpretations of this saying.

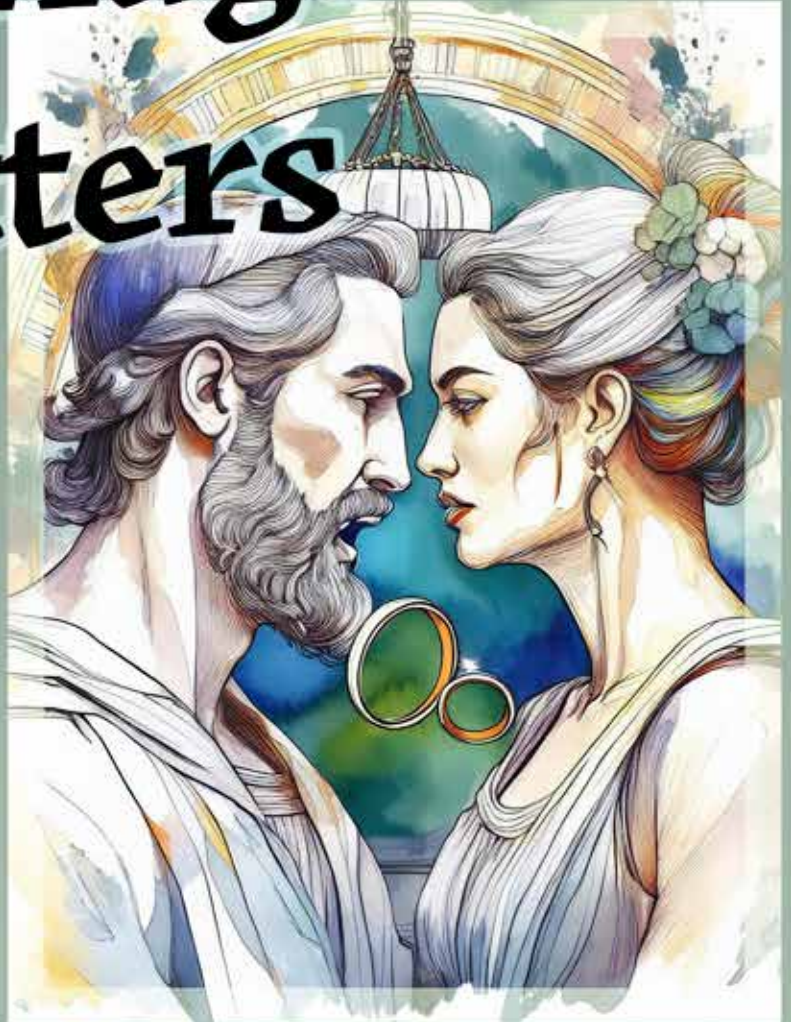
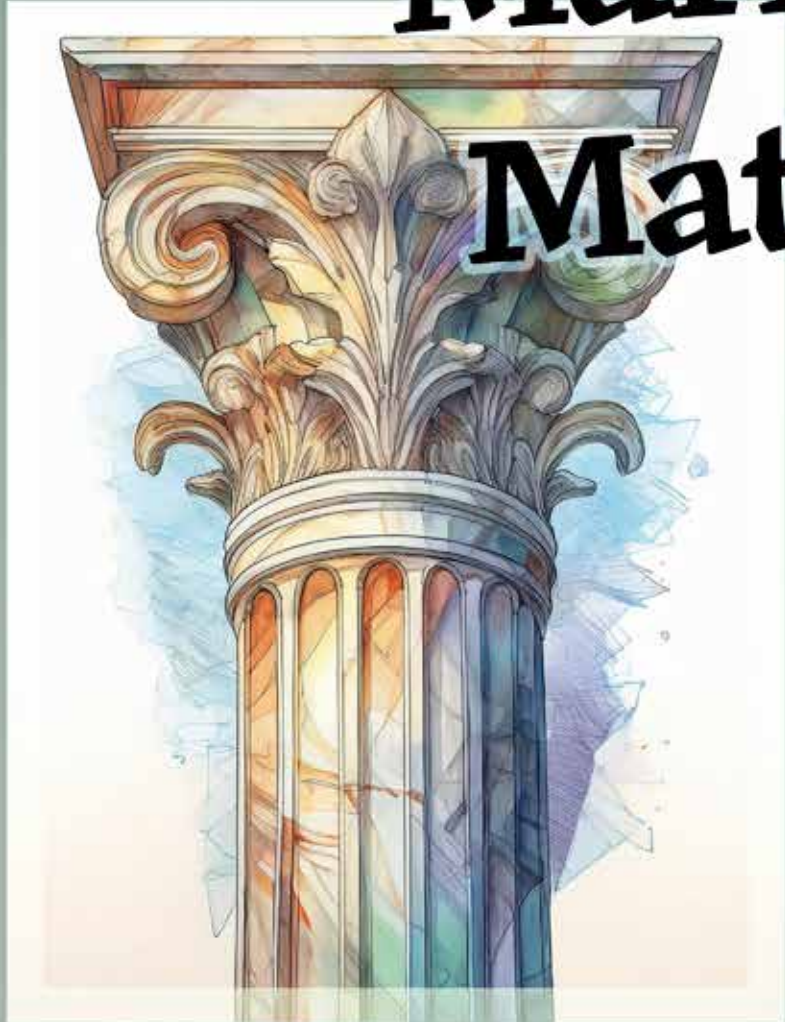
1. It represents a misunderstood scribal gloss.*
2. It is a general reference to the OT.
3. It refers to what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians.
4. It refers to Scripture that Paul has already quoted in 1 Corinthians.
5. It alludes to written statements in church regulations or previous letters.
6. It describes both interpretations 2 or 5—either as Scripture or as regulations.
7. It communicates that the Corinthian church's "childishness" is like a child's inability to read letters properly.¹

* A scribal gloss is an annotation made by a scribe in the margin or near the text of a manuscript.

¹ Brown, D. R., & Twist, E. T. (2013). 1 Corinthians (J. D. Barry & D. Mangum, Eds.; 1 Co 4:6). Lexham Press.



Civic & Marriage Matters



"All things are lawful for me' but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me' but I will not be dominated by anything."

"Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life?"

Your boasting is not good.

Do you not know that a little

leaven leavens the whole lump?"

"Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him."

"God judges those outside. Purge the evil person from among you."

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, this is a letter. If you haven't read the whole letter in a while, now would be a great time to do so. Hopefully, you've been asking yourself some serious questions regarding your role in the unity of your church. As we move into the rest of the letter, though Paul moves on from the subject of division, unity continues to be the undercurrent of every other problem that gets addressed.

Chapters five through seven deal with civic and marriage matters and contain some of the strongest rebukes in the entire letter. Here's a preview of what you can expect to learn.

- Unrepentant sin cannot be tolerated.
- We must judge one another righteously.
- It's better to be defrauded by a brother than to take him to court.
- Sexual immorality has no place in the church.
- Husbands and wives should have a healthy sexual intimacy.
- Divorce and remarriage are more complex than you think.
- Singleness can be a blessing.



Are you willing to have your conceptions of grace, judgment, sex, marriage, divorce, and singleness challenged?



Remove Unrepentant Sin {5:1-13}

Chapter five is the first in a volley of rebukes from Paul that addresses interpersonal issues within the Corinthian church. Some of these concerns civic matters, and others concern marriages. However, the issue at hand in this chapter stands apart from the others. A man was sleeping with his stepmother. According to the Law of Moses, this was considered incest (See Leviticus 18-20). But even outside of the Jewish/Christian faith, it was condemned.

Sin is Grievous

“And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.” – 1 Corinthians 5:2

Paul spent little time addressing the unnamed man’s sin but instead aimed at the sin of the church. They tolerated and even seemed untroubled by his behavior. Did the man and his stepmother own any responsibility here? Yes, but the church was even more wrong for their silence. What made disfellowship necessary?

First, this was public. The present tense of the verb **akouetai** (“it is reported”) leads some commentators to conclude that the report was actively spreading.¹ Second, the nature of the sin was distasteful even to outsiders. These two factors gave Paul the leeway to bypass the initial steps of church discipline in Matthew 18 and go straight to disfellowship.



Does sin cause you to mourn? When you consider your sin, those that you witness in your church, and your larger community, does it grieve you?

¹ Brown, D. R., & Twist, E. T. (2013). 1 Corinthians (J. D. Barry & D. Mangum, Eds.; 1 Co 5:1–2). Lexham Press.

Deliver Him to Satan *////////////////////*

“...you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” – 1 Corinthians 5:5

This is an interesting phrase. Paul only used the terminology of handing over to Satan in one other place.

“of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.” – 1 Timothy 1:20 (NKJV)

Though this seems to be an unusual and harsh treatment, the only thing unusual about it is Paul's phrasing. The practice of disfellowship also has Old Testament roots. If you've read the Torah, you know there are numerous reasons that a person would be put "outside the camp." Also, in Matthew 18:17, this is the final action of all efforts to reconcile a believer who remains unrepentant. Once they repent, they would be invited back into fellowship.

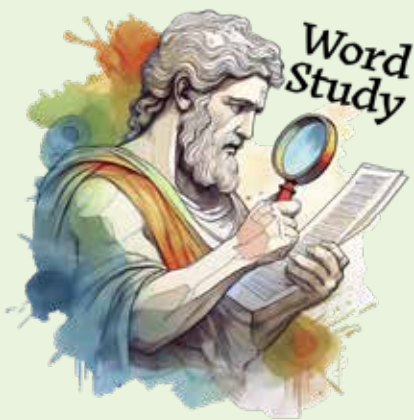
Why did Paul skip to the final step? Swift action is appropriate in cases of such severity, where the reputation of the church is being smeared and there's no willingness within the congregation to deal with it.

In verse four, Paul said this action is to be done when the church is assembled. This isn't a unilateral decision for a pastor or a group of elders to make. It's a church-wide decision. That doesn't absolve the elders of any responsibility. Indeed it would be their job to present the problem and recommend the course of action. But as a whole, it is the congregation's responsibility to put a person out of fellowship for unrepentant sin.

The harsh phrasing Paul used—"deliver this man to Satan"—parallels with the Jewish understanding of putting someone outside the camp. The wilderness was considered a place of demons, the domain of Azazel (See Leviticus 16). The concept is that within the community of faith, there is protection from the evil one. For Paul, being put outside the church community was equivalent to being banished to Satan's domain. You're vulnerable, unprotected, and an easy target for Satan's schemes when you're outside of the fellowship.



How does this affect the notion that believers do not have to unite with a local church for fellowship?



Sexual Immorality (5:1)

[*porneia* (*por-nee-ah*)]

Porneia appears 24 times in the New Testament. The ESV almost always translates it as “sexual immorality,” except once in Revelation 19:2 where it is rendered as “immorality.” Except for the book of Revelation, which uses the word in a metaphorical sense, every other use of the word refers to unsanctioned sexual activity. That means any sexual act outside of the confines of the healthy intimacy shared between a husband and wife in marriage.

Every Day is Passover

“Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.”

– 1 Corinthians 5:7

While it might seem unusual to mention Passover during this correction, Paul didn’t see it that way. He viewed the entire Christian life as a Passover celebration. For Passover, the Jews were to remove all leaven (yeast) from their houses during the seven days of the feast. Leaven symbolized sin and is symbolically used throughout much of Scripture for that purpose (except one Kingdom parable in Luke 13:20-21).

Paul’s comparison of Christ as our Passover lamb is the most explicit parallel made in the New Testament. Other passages make the comparison, only more subtly. In Paul’s reasoning, since Christ is our Passover lamb, and we have been covered with His blood, we should diligently remove leaven from our lives. Hence, “a little leaven leavens the whole lump.” Even a little sin will multiply and spread throughout the whole congregation.



Knowing that new life in Christ is a lifelong Passover observance, how should our attitudes toward sin and grace be affected?

You Are a Judge

“But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.”
– 1 Corinthians 5:11

Judging others is always a contentious topic. No one wants to be judged. Also, everyone makes judgments. If you're under the microscope, you want mercy. If you're the one peering into the microscope, you want justice. We judge others by their actions, but when it comes to being judged, we want to be judged by our intentions.

Paul made it clear that we should make righteous judgments within the congregation. Even the often misunderstood passage in Matthew chapter seven teaches us to make righteous judgments. Many read Matthew 7:1 and stop.

“Judge not, that you be not judged.” – Matthew 7:1 (NKJV)

However, if you keep reading, the teaching is that unrighteous judgments will be rendered back with the same measure. Therefore, make righteous judgments. Don't judge others before you judge yourself with the same standard.

“Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.”
– Matthew 7:5 (NKJV)

So, in the Corinthian case, Paul instructed them (and us) to judge a brother or sister who is unrepentant over their sin and cut them off from fellowship. Don't even eat with anyone who professes to believe, yet continues in unrepentant, public sin. It's not complicated, but it is controversial.

Why controversial? Our problem is that we think we can be more gracious than God. When we do as the Corinthians did and tolerate unrepentant sin, we de facto declare that we are more gracious than the Lord. We must recognize that He IS a gracious God, and that if He prescribes disfellowship for the unrepentant sinner, that IS the gracious thing to do! It's gracious for the body of Christ and ultimately gracious toward the sinner. It preserves the congregation; it presses the sinner toward repentance.

However, your jurisdiction as a judge is limited to the congregation. We are not given license to judge unbelievers.

“For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you.’” – 1 Corinthians 5:12-13



How might the unchecked presence of unrepentant, public sin affect the congregation of a local church?

Ongoing Discussion ////////////////////////////////////

It doesn't take long in church life to hear someone say, "A sin is a sin," or "All sin is the same to God." However, this is only partially true. Let's address the accurate part first. In the broadest sense, any sin makes you a lawbreaker, from pencil theft to genocide. Breaking God's law renders you unrighteous and separated from Him. Therefore, from a broad perspective, all sins make you equally unrighteous and equally cut off from fellowship with the Lord.

But that is where the similarity ends.

First, there is a sin that Christ said is unforgivable. Blaspheming the Holy Spirit won't be forgiven in this age, or the age to come (Matt. 12:31-32). Christ, Himself, singled out one sin as different from the rest. Second, within the scope of human relationships, different sins have different impacts. If your neighbor steals your work gloves, that theft creates a small ripple. You may never know they were stolen and think you lost them. But if your neighbor steals your life savings, the impact is life changing. Same sin, different effects. Not even lost people would equate those two sins.

Additionally, insisting that all sin is the same to God infers that the Lord is either blind to or purposely ignores the relational impacts of different sins. Since we serve a God who keeps each of our tears in a bottle (Psalm 56:8), we must refute any hint that He is unconcerned or blind to how different sins impact our lives.

So, why do we distinguish between public and private sin? Why wouldn't we disfellowship individuals who are unrepentant for gluttony or profanity? While we shouldn't claim we would never do that, disfellowshipping is connected to the impact on the community, both within the church and outside. A person's overeating will likely never have the same impact as an ongoing sexual affair. When unrepentant sin risks causing outsiders to blaspheme the Lord, disfellowship should be considered.



How might the righteous use of Matthew 18's steps of discipline help keep private sins from becoming public?

What You Should Know //

Chapter five discusses an unusual problem alongside an unusual solution. The incest between the stepson and stepmom was unusual. It was unusual that the church took no action concerning it. Paul's solution was also unusual. While disfellowshipping isn't inherently unusual, it is rare for it to be the initial course of action. Can we just call this what it is?

Unusual.

However, within this abnormal circumstance are very practical insights for us. The church should not tolerate unrepentant sin, and the person in question should be disfellowshipped. This is true whether it's in the odd circumstances of this chapter, or at the end of a long, heartfelt effort to bring someone to repentance. Jesus made our course clear, and we should walk in it.

- Sin should grieve our hearts. (5:2)
- If a sin is public and heinous enough, immediate disfellowship is in order. (5:4)
- Disfellowship is done by the congregation. (5:4)
- Disfellowship is analogous to being banished to Satan's domain outside of the protection of the camp. (Lev 16)
- The Christian life is a daily celebration of Passover. (5:7)
- We should not associate with believers who are in public, unrepentant sin. (5:11)
- We are to make righteous judgments within the congregation. (5:12)





Matters of this Life {6:1-11}

Are you familiar with the word “jurisdiction”? According to Merriam-Webster, one definition is “the limits or territory within which authority may be exercised.” Chapter six takes a closer look at this subject. The Corinthian believers went to worldly courts outside the church to resolve various civil matters between brothers. Essentially, they were submitting themselves to the inferior jurisdiction of a separate kingdom. Paul’s correction was plain and to the point.

Kingdom Jurisdiction

“When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?” – 1 Corinthians 6:1

The implication of Paul’s question is simple. You are saints; they are not. You are being made righteous, while they remain unrighteous. Why seek them out instead of finding a resolution within the church?

It may be that the culture of Corinth was somewhat like ours in this regard. People would sue each other over trivial matters. Perhaps this is why the believers seemingly had no qualms with pursuing litigation in the Corinthian courts. It’s how they understood civil conflict resolution. It is important to note that these lawsuits concerned civil, not criminal matters. When someone breaks the law, the authorities are “an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (Romans 13:4). Criminal acts should be reported to the authorities, period. Thus, we are dealing with civil disputes, not criminal cases.



Why would fellow believers go to small claims court instead of the church for dispute resolution?

You Have Jurisdiction

“Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!” – 1 Corinthians 6:3

Paul appealed to the eschatological moment when humans will be glorified and given authority to judge angels. That alone deserves lengthy discussion, but that wasn't his point here. This is an argument from the greater to the smaller. If you will judge angels, then you can effectively judge the matters of this life.

The implication is that if they aren't faithful in judging one another fairly and resolving their civil disputes within the family, they aren't walking according to the Spirit. The Word and Spirit give us all the wisdom we need to manage such issues because when His work is complete in us, we'll judge much larger, angelic matters! When we walk in the light as He is in the light, we are not only having fellowship with one another, but we also walk in kingdom jurisdiction with one another to judge the matters of this life righteously.

As a believer living in the jurisdiction of the Lord's kingdom, you have a responsibility to judge wisely. That means knowing when to press for justice and when to show mercy. Knowing that difference will demonstrate great understanding, foster peace and harmony in the church, and glorify the Lord in the eyes of all.



In light of Kingdom jurisdiction, how must you change your understanding of what it means to resolve disputes in the church?

Lawsuits are a Defeat

*“To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?”
– 1 Corinthians 6:7*

This is the cornerstone of Paul's argument. The existence of these disputes revealed the underlying issue. They were still immature. They weren't prioritizing the needs of others over their own. They were more concerned with their own interests than those of others. What did James say?

“For where there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice.” – James 3:16 (LEB, emphasis added)

Selfish ambition is deadly to unity. It fractures community and invites chaos. Indeed, where selfish ambition exists, you won't find men and women crucifying the flesh and walking by the Spirit. You won't find believers serving and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Instead, you will find a group of people (not a community) devoid of spiritual authority, brimming with chaos, and ready to fall apart.

Unresolved conflict is evidence that decay is already at work. Taking these conflicts to worldly courts only reinforces this premise. You aren't mature; you're turning to the world for solutions, and you're bringing shame to the name of Christ. But that's not even the hard part.

Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? Paul took it to the next level. Perhaps you are right. You've suffered a wrong and you can justifiably pursue justice and restitution. Even so, why not simply suffer the wrong, and move on? Why not just accept the fraud and bear the cost? Why would Paul suggest such a response to injustice?

Because Christ suffered every wrong, every fraud, every injustice and opened not His mouth! Jesus bore the shame of the cross for the prize that He would receive on the other side of His suffering. The fair question then is, what prize awaits us for opening not our mouths?

His pleasure. Without faith, you cannot please Him. When we absorb the cost, forgive, and open not our mouths, we are more righteous—more Christ-like—than any pursuit of justice could ever achieve. That requires faith. Turning the other cheek means casting your hope forward by faith toward your reward. That pleases Him.



Is pleasing Christ enough for you to suffer wrongs and be defrauded, forgive, and let it go?

Ongoing Discussion

"I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers," – 1 Corinthians 6:5

First, Paul knew the answer to this question. Yes, there are people among you wise enough. How do we know this? Remember back in chapter one, he expressed gratitude that the Lord had gifted them in every way. Therefore, this wasn't a case of lacking people who could help judge a dispute. It's more likely that the ones going outside for justice didn't believe they would get what they wanted from in-house help.

What kind of faith do you have in the Lord? Do you believe that He can resolve the "matters pertaining to this life" through those He equips for such purposes within the church? This points to an issue that many are reluctant to acknowledge. We face significant challenges with unbelief. You may scan the landscape of your congregation and feel like you can't see someone with the right experience or credentials to handle your particular issue. But could the Lord have planted an ordinary person of extraordinary faith nearby, just a few seats down from you, who can help resolve things? The underlying issue of this passage is the unbelief of those who don't trust that the Lord gifts His church sufficiently to handle their particular problems.



Do you trust that the Lord has equipped your church sufficiently to address the varied disputes that arise?

What You Should Know

Believers are members God's kingdom, which is a higher jurisdiction. Therefore, when the matters of this life come between brothers, we should not seek counsel or mediation from worldly judges because they remain in the kingdom of darkness and partakers of evil.

- The Lord equips his people to handle conflict resolution between believers. (6:1-2)
- We should not go to worldly courts for resolution of civil matters. (6:4)
- The presence of lawsuits is a loss in itself, indicating a lack of maturity. (6:7)
- Many times Christ is more honored when we forgive and let it go. (6:7)
- You were once a member of the kingdom of darkness, but no more. Don't seek their counsel. (6:11)



Guard Your Union {6:12-20}

There is little agreement on how to title this passage among English translations that include subheadings. On one end of the spectrum, we have the Christian Standard Bible, which titles it “Glorifying God in Body and Spirit,” while on the other end is the Lexham English Bible, with “Avoid Sexual Immorality.” Neither title is incorrect. This passage indeed addresses a specific type of sexual immorality. However, the offense is far deeper.

Lawful vs. Helpful

*“All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be dominated by anything.”
– 1 Corinthians 6:12*

First, note that Paul began this passage with the phrase: “All things are lawful for me.” There is debate over whether Paul coined this phrase as part of his argument or if it was a quotation of a popular Corinthian slogan. If your Bible includes it in quotation marks, the translators lean toward the quotation side of the debate. Ultimately, whether Paul coined it or quoted it doesn’t change his point. However, if he was quoting it, that reveals a layer of outside influence that permeated the thinking of the Corinthian believers.

The belief that all things are lawful is revealing. To adapt an old catchphrase, what did Jesus do? Jesus rightly (and perfectly) observed the Law. Jesus didn’t believe that all things are lawful. On the contrary, He believed that there were many unlawful things. That affects our lived-out faith tremendously. If it is not I but Christ who lives in me, then my life will increasingly look the way that Jesus lives.

Not everything is helpful or productive in our transformation journeys. Some Corinthian believers adopted a Gnostic understanding of the body and spirit.¹ The body is of low importance and will be destroyed therefore,

¹ Gnosticism is generally considered a 2nd-century development, but its beginnings are discernable in the biblical letters.

enjoy it. All that matters is the spirit. Satisfying the body's desires would allow one to pursue matters of the spirit fully. But this is utterly counterproductive to the Holy Spirit's work of making you more like Jesus.



Do a quick self-evaluation. How much of the last week was given to things contrary to the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work?

Members of Christ

“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!”

– 1 Corinthians 6:15

Regardless of their reasons, Paul condemned their visits to prostitutes due to their union with Christ. As members of Christ, we shouldn't engage in sexually immoral activities. But there's more to this than simply prohibiting an activity because it's immoral. Paul connected our physical bodies to our spiritual membership in Christ, essentially saying that the physical and spiritual are part of the same whole. You cannot separate what you do in the body from your spiritual bond with Jesus. Therefore, when you indulge in sexual sin, you are bringing your union with Christ into the physical union of sex.

You are a member of Christ. Don't relegate that to an exclusively spiritual concept. Your entire being – body, mind, and spirit – belongs to Christ. Membership in Christ is spiritual, but it reaches beyond the spirit and encompasses your hands and feet. As a member of Christ, sexual purity is singled out as a particularly important physical act that we should keep holy. Sexual intimacy blurs the lines between physical and spiritual because Paul said we unite Christ to our sexual activities.



How should our union with Christ affect the way we think of and approach sexual intimacy in our marriages?

You Are a Temple

“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own,” – 1 Corinthians 6:19

Our union with Christ signifies one important truth for our bodies: they become temples of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. What are the implications of this? If the body is indeed a temple of the Lord, then what responsibilities do we have toward our bodies?

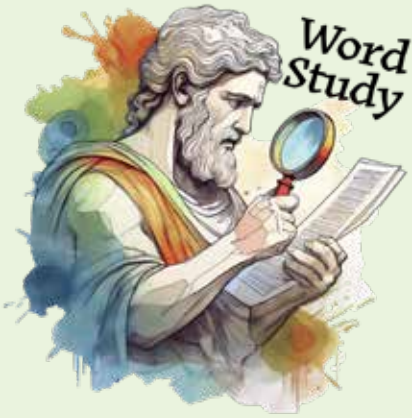
First, we must understand that we no longer own them. Christ’s blood has purchased our bodies (6:20). From the moment of our new birth, we assume the role of stewards of the temple that Christ has redeemed. This concept shouldn’t be difficult to grasp. If you owned a struggling business and a larger company bought it to save you from bankruptcy, you may still work there, but you would no longer be the owner. You transition from CEO to branch manager. In this case, you become the branch manager of the local temple that the Lord has acquired. What occurs at the branch is your responsibility, and you will be held accountable for its activities when the Owner assesses things.

Second, unlike the branch comparison, the CEO resides at the local branch. The Lord didn’t merely purchase a temple to own from a distant headquarters; He actually lives there. That’s the advantage of being an omnipresent Owner. He takes up residence in every branch He acquires. Therefore, wherever we go, the Lord accompanies us. In this context, when we engage in sexual activity, the Lord is present in it. In fact, Paul seems to say that sexual immorality is the only sin that is against our bodies (6:18) because we unite ourselves with others outside of a covenant (6:16) and bring the Lord into that illicit union.

Finally, while Paul focused on sexual immorality, just as Adam was tasked with working and keeping the Garden (Gen 2:15), and similarly to the Old Covenant priests who had daily duties for maintaining the Tabernacle, we have our own priestly responsibilities toward our temple. We are the primary sentinels at the door. What comes in and goes out is within our purview.



How does the Lord’s ownership of your body alter your perspective on how you use it?



Members (6:15) [melos (meh-lohs)]

Melos appears 23 times in the New Testament. The ESV almost always translates it as “members” or “parts.” It refers to parts of the human body, though it is often used metaphorically to describe parts of the Body of Christ. We are melos Christos—members of Christ (6:15). We do not present the melos—members—of our bodies to sin (Rom 6:13). Highlighting their importance, the members of the Body of Christ are compared to physical body parts in 1 Corinthians 12.

Ongoing Discussion

“So glorify God in your body.” – 1 Corinthians 6:20b

This principle doesn’t stop with sex. It extends to all aspects of life. Given the physical-spiritual reality in which we exist, our union with Christ impacts every activity we undertake with our bodies. If it affects the body, then it touches our union with Christ. Later, Paul states that whether we eat or drink, we should do it for God’s glory (10:31). The applications can be numerous, but let’s focus on one particular aspect of glorifying God both in and through our bodies.

To accomplish this effectively, numerous factors must be considered. What could undermine us? A common tactic of temptation is to strike when we are vulnerable. Weakness manifests in both physical and mental forms, and temptation capitalizes on both. How can we fortify ourselves to better protect our union with Jesus?

First, we must rest. Rest is so important that God programmed it into the created order. On the seventh day, He rested. The cycles of day and night reflect work and rest rhythms. It’s fair to say that sometimes the rest needed is a leisurely pace and an afternoon nap. However, there are times when the rest you require is found in life-giving activities to your soul.

Secondly, we must go to war. It’s not sufficient to merely work. Work is just an expenditure of energy. War is purposeful; it is strategic effort directed toward a specific aim. Some suggest that work brings order to chaos, but that assumes chaos is mindless and disorganized. War is about imposing order on chaos that

intentionally works against you. Rest isn't just for reenergizing us for work; it's for recharging us for war. War demands strategy and weapons. Equip yourself, study the playbook, and engage in war each day.

Healthy rhythms of rest and war sharpen us, make us wise, and keep us prepared to protect our union with Christ. There is much to discuss regarding this topic, but this study cannot cover all of it. If you want to learn more about the healthy rhythms of rest and war, consider reading Ben Stuart's book, Rest and War: Rhythms of a Well-Fought Life.



What steps can you take today to strengthen your union with Christ in every aspect of life?

What You Should Know //

Some scholars regard this passage as difficult describing it with words like "disjointed" "imprecise" and "incoherent" (Ciampa and Rosner, 2010, p 245). However, what is clear is that Paul regarded our union with Christ as reason enough to avoid sexual immorality with prostitutes. When we engage in sexual activity, we are uniting Christ to that union, regardless of our intentions. These are some difficult truths to reconcile considering how culture has programmed us to understand sex. Here's what you should know from our passage.

- The body belongs to the Lord. (6:13)
- Our bodies are members of Christ. (6:15)
- Christ is present when we are sexually intimate with someone. (6:15)
- Sexual intimacy is set apart from other acts that we do in the body. (6:18)
- Since the Holy Spirit dwells within, our physical bodies become temples of the Lord. (6:19)
- We have a responsibility to ensure that God is glorified in our temples. (6:20)



Secondly, Paul appears to disregard complementarian roles when it comes to sexual intimacy. Neither spouse has authority over their bodies; instead, the wife has authority over her husband's body, and the husband has authority over the wife's (7:4). The marriage bed is distinctly egalitarian, granting each spouse equal authority over the other.

What does this mean? In simple terms, it means that each spouse should consider the other's sexual needs. It's not just one spouse steering the ship; sex should not be controlled by one person in the marriage. Rather, it is a gift freely given by each spouse, not a bargaining chip to get what you want.

This isn't a foreign concept.

“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”
– *Philippians 2:3–4 (NKJV)*

At first glance, it might not seem overly spiritual, but Paul understood that healthy sexual intimacy between a husband and wife is sanctifying, protective, and supportive for each spouse's spiritual life. Therefore, if there is a desire to abstain for a short time so that you can devote yourself to prayer (sex fast), both spouses must agree, and the duration of the fast should be limited.



Does the biblical ethic for healthy sexual intimacy challenge you? If you are married, what adjustments do you need to make in your understanding of healthy sex in your marriage?

Remain Single... If You Can //

“To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am.” – *1 Corinthians 7:8*

The topic of singleness will be addressed more fully later in chapter seven, but here, Paul telegraphs his views on the matter. He believes that singleness offers advantages that marriage does not. Paul is a single man, and there is no historical or biblical evidence to suggest he was ever married. Therefore, his perspective on singleness is shaped by his own experiences and by observing the lives of married couples.

However, in this part of the chapter, the more relevant verse between verses eight and nine addresses self-control regarding sexual urges. If you “burn with passion,” you should seek to marry rather than entangle yourself in sins of sexual immorality. Was Paul suggesting that marriage is merely a way to legitimize sex? No, but the purpose of marriage includes healthy sexual intimacy. It is part of the covenant of marriage. Therefore, Paul’s admonition isn’t out of bounds.

To be clear, wisdom is essential when approaching marriage. Is it the God-ordained path to healthy sex? Yes. However, couples shouldn’t rush into marriage merely for the sake of sex. An ill-conceived and poorly thought-out marriage will be detrimental to sexual intimacy in the long run.



How can a lack of wisdom in other areas of marriage destroy sexual intimacy?

Divorce

“To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.” – 1 Corinthians 7:10–11

The subject of divorce is sensitive, mainly because it is so prevalent. You’ll find a spectrum of beliefs within the church surrounding this issue. However, the point that most churches agree upon is that divorce is not a part of the Lord’s plan for marriage.

Paul’s teaching here presents challenges. He forbids remarriage after divorce. The difficulty is the qualifying statement, “not I, but the Lord.” Paul qualified what he was about to say because it would impact the Corinthians significantly. Two thousand years later, it continues to hit hard. There’s no way to finagle out of the clear instructions in these verses. And, though the command to reconcile isn’t repeated for husbands, it has been widely understood that this applies equally to wives and husbands.

When one encounters these verses, there is a temptation for those who are divorced to despair. Perhaps you’re a divorced single and hope for remarriage. This passage says no; instead, you should be reconciled with your former spouse. Paul’s reasoning for this has depth.

First, here he spoke to believing spouses. The greater sin in that case is that two spouses who had been reconciled to the Father in Christ couldn't find a way to reconcile themselves to each other. Because we have been completely forgiven and reconciled, we should always pursue forgiveness and reconciliation in our relationships. It speaks to the caliber of your faith in the Lord's power to save your marriage. You didn't give up on your spouse; you didn't even give up on yourself. You gave up on the Lord.

Second, marriage serves as a living, real-time reflection of Christ's relationship with His church. It illustrates to the world the depth of Christ's love for His church. The destruction of this illustration only intensifies the world's blindness to the Gospel. We are His imagers, and our marriages reflect His relationship with us. This makes the institution of marriage greater than just the husband and wife. It's about demonstrating the Lord's glory and power to a dying world. Reconciliation may be the most powerful testimony we can provide.

It is beyond doubt that there are circumstances that will make reconciliation and remarriage impossible. There may have been wrongs committed against you that you can forgive, but they hinder trust from forming again. Your ex-spouse may have no interest in reconciliation and remarriage. Sometimes, they remarry and leave you with no opportunity to reconcile. What then? Trust the Lord, and lean upon His grace and mercy, ask the Lord for a new spouse, and allow Him to lead you.



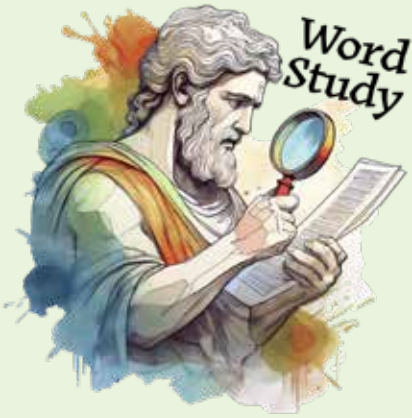
Based on what we've discussed, how would you counsel a divorced believer who is contemplating remarriage?

Unequally Yoked

"But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace."

– 1 Corinthians 7:15

Continuing his teachings on divorce, Paul made a distinction for marriages in which one spouse believes while the other does not. At first glance, it appears that Paul made an exception to his teachings in verses ten and eleven, permitting the believing spouse to remarry if the unbelieving spouse seeks a divorce. However, interpreters aren't unified over Paul's intended meaning in this verse. Some appeal to 7:39 as the rule and



Self-Control (7:9)

[*enkrateuomai* (in-kra-teh-vo-meh)]

Enkrateuomai occurs only twice in the New Testament and is translated as “self-control.” It is the middle voice form of *enkratēs* which appears in Titus 1:8 and is translated as “discipline.” The definition means to exercise self-restraint and to be temperate. Paul used it in a negative sense, where if you do not possess *enkrateuomai* over your sexual desires, you should seek to marry. Discipline isn’t an end unto itself, but rather a means to keep us from sin.

that even in these cases, remarriage is not permitted. Others would say that because God has called the believing spouse to peace, they would be released from the futility of reconciling with an unbeliever who abandoned the marriage.¹ The latter interpretation seems to be the more likely one.

However, the believing spouse is not permitted to initiate a divorce. Why? Because the believing spouse may lead the unbelieving spouse to Jesus. This perspective is very kingdom-minded. If you are the believing spouse in an unequally yoked marriage, your faith in the Lord can guide your partner toward salvation. It demonstrates a tangible commitment to placing the Kingdom potential of your unbelieving spouse above your own desires. The unbelieving one is “made holy” by the believing one (7:14). This doesn’t necessarily mean they will be saved, but your faith is performing a sanctifying work that can effectively remove the obstacles to faith for your husband or wife.



How will a Kingdom perspective in your marriage provide hope?

Remain As You Are

“Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.”
– 1 Corinthians 7:20

¹ ESV Study Bible notes on 1 Corinthians 7:15. Taken from the ESV® Study Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), Copyright © 2008 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

At times, when people are saved, their temptation is to change their circumstances as soon as possible. Paul isn't so sure. In fact, he instructed the Corinthians to remain where they were. Let's first discuss what this does not mean. If you were an addict of any kind before you were saved, Paul wasn't commanding you to stay an addict or to remain in situations that would keep you in addiction. Any circumstance that leads you to sin or allows ongoing sins against you should be left behind as soon as possible.

What Paul means is this: the Lord saved you in a specific place, time, and circumstance, and there is a purpose in that. He argued that if you were born a Gentile, you shouldn't seek to become Jewish or vice versa. The Lord's work for you begins where He saved you; it may not end there, but it starts there. He pointed out that if you were a slave when you believed, you should remain a slave unless an opportunity for freedom arises (7:21). Don't rush to make drastic changes, but prayerfully consider why the Lord has placed you here and now.

This may seem to stray from the topic of marriage, but it doesn't. He's addressing the saved spouse in an unequally yoked marriage. Stay put and see what the Lord does. His plans for you begin where He saved you. Walk with Him and stay in step with the Holy Spirit. However, based on Paul's examples, the concept has a wide application.



Regardless of whether you have been saved for a long or short time, how are you serving the Lord in the place, time, and circumstances you find yourself in?

Ongoing Discussion

“For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.” – 1 Corinthians 7:14

The wording of this verse has caused enormous discussion. Earlier, we covered that the believing spouse's faith sanctifies (makes holy) the other. Paul took it even further and said it also makes the children holy. In this verse, his use of the word holy is a little outside of how he uses it elsewhere.

The Greek word *hagiazō* is translated by the ESV as “made holy.” This term is most often applied to believers, as they are made holy in Christ. In this context, Paul states that the believing spouse makes the unbelieving

spouse and their children holy. The difficulty here is translating the word in a way that doesn't strip it of meaning yet doesn't contradict other plain teachings.

The likely meaning is what we said earlier. The sanctifying work of a believing spouse's faith clears obstacles to faith. It plows the soil of the unbelieving spouse's heart. It does the same thing for their children. In fact, the very reason God hates divorce is revealed in Malachi.

*“But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit?
And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your
spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth.”
— Malachi 2:15 (NKJV)*

A faithful marriage, even if only one spouse believes, enhances the likelihood of godly offspring, which is what the Lord desires.



How can we shepherd children who have endured the divorce of their parents?

What You Should Know //

Everything we've covered in this lesson contains something difficult. Marriage can be a complicated, difficult endeavor if we are not crucifying the flesh, maintaining a Kingdom perspective, and putting the needs of our spouses before our own needs. Here's what you should know from this passage.

- Healthy sexual intimacy is protective, sanctifying, and supportive for each spouse's spiritual life. (7:5)
- If you can exercise self-control, remain single and devote yourself to mission. (7:8)
- When believers divorce, every effort should be made to reconcile before seeking a new spouse. (7:10-11)
- If an unbelieving spouse divorces their believing spouse, the believer is not bound and is free. (7:15)
- If the unbelieving spouse is content to remain married, the believer should not seek a divorce. (7:13)
- The believing spouse's faith has a sanctifying effect on the unbelieving spouse. (7:14)
- Don't seek changes to your circumstances just because you were saved. God will use you where He saved you. (7:24)



Singleness {7:25-40}

It may seem strange, but Paul dedicated nearly as much time to singles as he did to married couples in this letter. Why is that considered strange? Primarily because churches tend to concentrate on marriage much more than on singleness. Yet, here, Paul provided a lengthy teaching on being single.

To the Singles

“Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy.”

– 1 Corinthians 7:25

The term “betrothed” refers to the Greek word for “virgins.” Paul made some assumptions in his choice of nouns. First, there is an assumption that the people in question are honoring the Lord by remaining sexually pure. Second, the Greek is feminine, so he likely has women in mind, although there is no doubt that young men can also be included.

Since the Lord did not provide a command about singleness, Paul shared his personal judgment. This judgment was influenced by what Paul called the “present distress.” Some think he was referencing the eschatological distress that would occur before Christ’s return. Others, however, believe he was alluding to a more localized issue, such as a famine or food shortage. Regardless of the nature of the distress, Paul advised everyone to stay put. If you are betrothed to a spouse, do not separate. If you are free from marriage, remain single. He believed singleness created opportunities for a singular focus on Kingdom work.



How can singles give their singleness to the Lord? How can the married continue to serve the Lord with a similar focus?

The Time is Short

“For the present form of this world is passing away.” – 1 Corinthians 7:31b

Verses twenty-nine through thirty-one can be confusing. Paul’s encouragement seems to suggest that spouses should be dismissive of one another. Husbands should live as if they are single, and vice versa. While the wording is strange, the meaning is clear. Married couples should not allow their concerns for each other to supersede their commitment to follow the Lord.

When believers marry, they unite their pursuits of Jesus. It’s not that they cease to have individual relationships with the Lord. Both the husband and wife are accountable for cultivating their friendships with the Lord. However, within marriages, the Holy Spirit will guide both spouses in mutually supportive growth. Husbands and wives won’t be led to do anything that would harm the marriage. Therefore, when Paul instructs spouses to live as if they are single, it’s a call for both to prioritize their relationship with Jesus. This is the best approach for their marriage in all circumstances and will ensure that they both walk in step with the Lord and each other.

Walking in step with one another is crucial because time is short. For two thousand years, this has been the case, but Paul’s warning should not be confined only to Christ’s return. Death is always close. None of us know when we will pass from this life into our eternal reward. Therefore, plan for a long, fulfilling life, but live as if either Christ or death could arrive today, and you will maximize your usefulness for the Kingdom.



Would you describe your marriage as two believers pursuing the Lord in step with one another and the Spirit?

Free of Anxieties

“I want you to be free from anxieties.” – 1 Corinthians 7:32a

This is an interesting passage. Paul began by expressing his desire for believers to be free from anxieties. But then, the single person is anxious about the things of the Lord. Didn’t he just say he wants us to be free

from anxiety? Herein lies an interpretive problem. Scholars are divided on how to understand Paul’s use of the word “anxiety.”

To begin, we must remember that Paul was addressing singles. He has already established that marriage is good and that there is no sin in marrying (7:28). In fact, in Ephesians, Paul speaks his most highly of marriage, calling it an image of Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:32). This understanding should guide our interpretation of the anxieties that Paul mentions regarding husbands and wives.

Thus, recognizing that he was addressing singles, Paul’s hope for them is expressed in verse thirty-five: good order and undivided devotion to the Lord. With this in mind, his teaching that marriage brings anxieties about “worldly things” (7:33) shouldn’t be viewed as a slight against marriage. Those “worldly things” aren’t merely things of the flesh but rather issues related to the healthy concerns of an institution that will only exist in this world, which is passing away (7:31). Simply put, he wanted singles to remain free from the good concerns that come with marriage and to keep their focus fixed on the Lord.



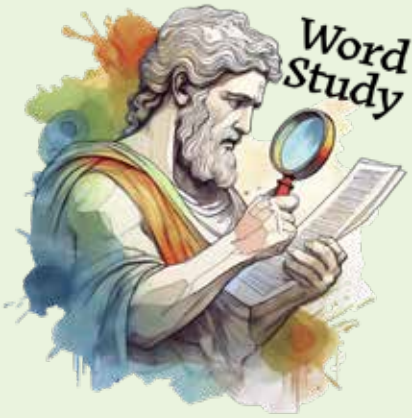
Whether married or single, our spiritual lives should be marked by good order and undivided devotion. What might need to change to move things more in that direction?

Strong Passions or Past Prime? //////////////////////////////////////

“If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin.” – 1 Corinthians 7:36

We have a problem. Depending on the English translation you read, this verse can be somewhat different. Above is the rendering of the English Standard Version of the Bible. Here are other translations.

“But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, if she is past the flower of youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry.” (NKJV)



Betrothed (7:25) [parthenos (par-thin-ohs)]

Parthenos occurs 14 times in the New Testament and is translated in the ESV as “virgin,” “unmarried,” “betrothed,” and “woman.” Although the word is often used in reference to young women who have never had sexual relations, it can also be used to speak of young men who’ve remained chaste. The word is also used in a figurative sense in 2 Corinthians 11:2 where Paul employs it to describe the Corinthian church’s relationship to Christ.

“But if a man thinks that he’s treating his fiancée improperly and will inevitably give in to his passion, let him marry her as he wishes. It is not a sin.” (NLT)

“If any man thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, if she is getting beyond the usual age for marriage, and he feels he should marry—he can do what he wants. He is not sinning; they can get married.” (CSB)

The Greek word “hyperakmos” has a dual meaning. In the masculine form, it translates to “passions are strong.” But in the feminine form, it means “past her prime.” It isn’t clear which Paul intended, so translating committees vary on how to interpret. The ESV Study Bible includes a note that says the masculine understanding is more coherent with 7:2-3 and 7:9, which deal with the burning passions of sexual desire.¹ Therefore, it seems likely that Paul was restating what he said earlier. If you can’t control your sexual desires, you should marry, and there is no sin in doing so.

How does this relate to singleness? The difficulty of this passage is that Paul seems to encourage delayed marriage. In verse thirty-seven, he taught that if you are betrothed and can keep your desires under control, then you should remain single for as long as you can. This lends credence to a feminine understanding of hyperakmos. Remain single until, by necessity, you must marry. In other words, don’t wait too long and miss the opportunity to bear children.

¹ ESV Study Bible notes on 1 Corinthians 7:36. Taken from the ESV® Study Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), Copyright © 2008 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

It's also helpful to recognize cultural differences. Our 21st-century Western understanding of engagement bears little resemblance to 1st-century betrothals. Arranged marriages have been the norm throughout most of human history. The individuals Paul wrote to were likely paired by their families. The betrothal itself was as legally binding as the marriage; to break off the betrothal, one would need to obtain a divorce. Therefore, when Paul addressed the betrothed, he was speaking to people who were legally committed to marriage. In that light, it seems his advice in verse thirty-seven was to delay for the maximum legal time before marrying and relinquishing the freedoms that singleness provides for Kingdom work.

Throughout, it's assumed that Paul was addressing both single and widowed individuals. While this seems to be the implication, Paul issued a specific statement to the widowed. When your spouse dies, you clearly re-enter the singles category. However, it appears that some widows in Corinth were struggling with whether remarriage would be permissible. Paul clarified this: If your spouse dies, you can remarry, but only in the Lord.

His qualifier, "only in the Lord," echoes back to what we discussed in the last lesson for divorced singles who wish to remarry after unsuccessful attempts at reconciliation. Let the Lord lead you. Remarriage, whether after divorce or death, is a serious matter that far too many approach recklessly. In Paul's view, there's more happiness to be found in remaining unmarried once the first marriage is over (7:40).



Does the church place such a heavy emphasis on healthy marriages that we neglect an emphasis on healthy singleness?

Ongoing Discussion

"And I think that I too have the Spirit of God." – 1 Corinthians 7:40

Add this to the list of difficult statements Paul makes in 1 Corinthians chapter seven. This remark appears to lack context. We know it must have context, but that has been lost to us. Why would he make this statement? The best thing we can do is attempt to read between the lines.

Considering everything discussed so far, particularly the points about factions and leaders mentioned earlier in the letter, one issue rises to prominence: Paul's authority. This theme was common for Paul; wolves would

often infiltrate after his departure, leading believers to question his apostolic authority. However, it appears to be more pronounced in Corinth, as he devotes significant time in 2 Corinthians to defending his apostolic ministry.

So, at the end of this chapter, Paul asserted his authority by claiming that he, too, had the Spirit of God. Why was it important to mention this here? Why not later? Chapter seven stands out in 1 Corinthians because Paul appeared to offer his opinions more freely. Verses twelve, seventeen, twenty-five, and forty all contain indicators that what Paul said was his opinion or judgment, not a command from the Lord. Knowing this, perhaps Paul believed it appropriate to end this discussion, which contained several of his personal opinions, with a direct reminder that the Holy Spirit leads him in his teachings.

That is a great segue to this: even if Paul stated that it was his opinion or judgment, inspired by the Holy Spirit, it is also the Lord's judgment. To state it plainly, if Paul perceived wiggle room for betrothed couples to prolong their singleness, it was because the Holy Spirit told him that there was wiggle room. Even Paul's personal opinions, to the extent that they made it into Scripture, carry the weight of inspired text and possess the same authority.



Do you submit yourself to the authority of the written Word of God? Does it guide you in all of your ways? Have you struggled over whether Paul's opinions carry the same weight as a command from the Lord?

What You Should Know //

The Lord calls some to marriage, and some to singleness. Paul was a man called to singleness, and he encouraged the single in the Corinthian church to maximize that season of their lives. Here's what you should know from this passage.

- The Lord gave no command concerning singleness, so Paul offers an inspired opinion. (7:25)
- Marriage is not a sin, but it does come with additional responsibilities. (7:26)
- The appointed time is short, so fully devote yourselves to the Lord. (7:29)
- Paul's desire is for believers to have good order in their lives and an undivided devotion to Jesus. (7:35)
- Widows are free to remarry, but should consider remaining single for the Lord. (7:39-40)



**Christian Liberty
& Conscience**

"You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons."

"But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."

"So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

"But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak."

"Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor."

We're just past halfway through this letter. By the way, have you read the entire letter? Now would be a great time to read it again. Chapter eight marks a significant subject change. Paul moves on to matters of Christian liberty and conscience. For many, this section is challenging because Paul seems to play both sides. On one hand, don't cause your brother to stumble (8:13), but on the other hand, your brother's conscience shouldn't dictate your liberty (10:29). Which is it? How are we supposed to harmonize those statements? This will challenge both the strong and weak brothers to consider others before themselves.

Here's a preview of what's ahead.

- Sinning against your brother's conscience is a sin against Christ.
- Though you may have rights, exercising those rights isn't always Christlike.
- Everything we do should be leveraged for the sake of the Gospel.
- We should not let our liberty lead us into idolatry.
- No temptation is unique to you, and God always provides an escape.
- Do everything to the glory of the Lord.



Would you consider yourself skilled at laying down your rights for the sake of others?



Stumbling Blocks {8:1-13}

Paul’s primary point in chapter eight isn’t difficult to discern, but the path to get there is fraught with challenges. Verse thirteen is clear, but it isn’t clear precisely what Paul meant by “knowledge” nor is it clear what the Corinthians meant when they said “all of us possess knowledge.” We will spend some of our time untangling the first half of chapter eight so that verse thirteen will be cast in a proper context.

Possessing Knowledge

“Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ This ‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up.”
— 1 Corinthians 8:1

The first hurdle to overcome relates to how the quote, “all of us possess knowledge,” connects with food offered to idols. What did the Corinthians mean by this? Whatever they meant, Paul quickly corrected them and pointed out that their “knowledge” was making them arrogant. Something about their beliefs about food offered to idols was unloving.

What was this knowledge? Scholars differ on this issue. However, broadly speaking, a summarizing description can be stated like this: the Corinthians believed the Holy Spirit gave them special knowledge—which isn’t entirely untrue since spiritual truth can only be understood by spiritual people (2:13). Nonetheless, they expected all believers at all stages of growth to embrace their particular understanding.

This seems to be a reasonable explanation of their knowledge. Paul unpacks some of the specifics of what they believed in the next few verses. First, they believed that “an idol has no real existence.” This shouldn’t be misunderstood. This statement is referring to the physical statue or graven image that was worshiped. The Corinthians understood that men created that statue, and anything created by men cannot be a god. However, this doesn’t mean there aren’t spiritual beings receiving the worship given to those idols.

“For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords)” – 1 Corinthians 8:5 (NKJV)

Second, because they knew those idols were lifeless—even if they did represent rebelling spiritual beings—their worship was reserved only for the one true Lord of all and His Son, Jesus Christ. They understood that He alone created all things, including the rebelling spirits behind idols, and therefore, any meat sacrificed to those idols meant nothing to them. In all of this, Paul did not correct their belief but instead affirmed it.

However, they were still wrong despite having the right beliefs.



Have you ever been correct about a belief while simultaneously wrong in how that belief affected your behavior?

Weaker Brothers

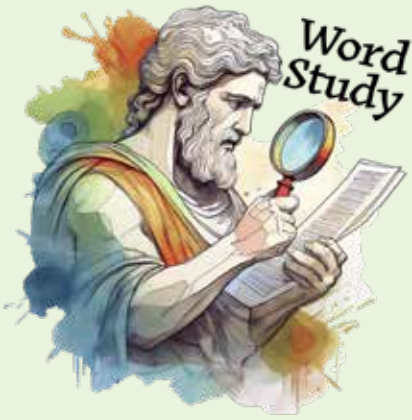


“But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.” – 1 Corinthians 8:9

First, let's understand that Paul never uses the description of “weak” in a disparaging way. He also mentions it in Romans chapter fourteen. In both cases, he referred to less mature believers. They haven't yet learned what the more mature have learned. Additionally, there is a case for people who may possess the same theological knowledge, but due to previous experiences, cannot arrive at the same conclusions as others.

We likely know both types. For sure, there are people in the faith who were actually “born yesterday” in that they have only recently been saved. We (hopefully) don't expect them to live like someone who has known the Lord for years. There are also believers who lived a certain way before they were saved, and because of that, they can never again do certain things, even if those things aren't technically sinful.

Paul admonished the Corinthians for their sake. These weaker brothers had not yet learned the knowledge that the Corinthians were reveling in (8:7). Paul reminded the church that some of these brothers once worshiped



Right (8:9) [exousia (ecks-oo-see-a)]

Exousia occurs 92 times in the New Testament and is translated in the ESV as "authority," "power," "right," "control," "(in) charge," "jurisdiction," "(at your) disposal," and "domain." All uses of the word have to do with either the force, capacity, or power to take action or the liberty or right to take action. In the ESV it is most often translated as the word "authority." How exousia is translated depends greatly on the grammatical context of the verse.

the idols to whom this meat was sacrificed. Their insistence on eating that meat was harming their weaker brothers' consciences. Though the eaters had good theology, they had unloving practice. Instead of building up their new brothers in love, they were tearing them down with freedom.



How often do you consider if your practice of faith creates stumbling blocks for weaker Christians?

Abstain For the Weak

"Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." - 1 Corinthians 8:13

In verse eight, Paul made a case for his point: "We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do." If there is no real loss from abstaining and no real gain from participating, why bother with it at all? This is a plea to purge pointless things from our lives. "Food will not commend us to God." In other words, what's the point if this activity isn't building the kingdom and storing treasures in heaven? We've already heard Paul make pleas for people to maximize their lives for kingdom work, whether married or single. This thought is in that same vein. If there isn't a kingdom purpose, don't waste your time with it.

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Now, consider how this may offend your brother's conscience. Not only is this activity of no eternal value, but it also undermines someone else's faith. This represents a miscarriage of freedom. Enjoying freedom at the expense of another's conscience isn't loving. In the Lord's kingdom, the greatest freedom is found in serving others, not in ensuring that your freedom is exercised.



What liberties do you take that are technically "in bounds" for Christian behavior but may become a stumbling block for less mature believers?

Ongoing Discussion

"For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?" – 1 Corinthians 8:10

Depending on your background, you may have come from a church tradition that emphasizes avoidance of things that could be a stumbling block for others. For example, many churches embrace a teetotaling position, meaning Christians should never consume alcoholic beverages. Why do they embrace this position when the Scripture only calls drunkenness a sin? If one can consume alcohol without becoming drunk, why should he or she abstain? Typically, the answer given is to avoid becoming a stumbling block to others.

In verse ten, Paul essentially described relapse triggered by inconsiderate brothers. The weaker brother is bothered by the meat from the idol's temple, but because of peer pressure, violates his conscience about the meat. In the weaker brother's heart, he's participating in idol worship, which would be sinful for him.

When we don't consider the conscience of others, we may lead them into sin, even though what we're doing may not be a sin for us. Hence, "by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed." Do not take your brother's conscience lightly. If he voices his reservations, honor them. It's a simple thing to do, yet this has been an ongoing problem in the church from the start.

Admittedly, if you find something enjoyable in your life that isn't sinful, it can be challenging to step back from it for the sake of someone else's conscience. In fact, the temptation is often to expect the weaker brother or sister to either elevate to your understanding or to find a way to get over it. Neither of those responses is loving. This issue drills deep into whether we truly love one another as the Father loves us.

Corinthians, Paul mockingly referred to them as “super-apostles” (2 Corinthians 11:5). Though unnamed, these false apostles influence the broader discussion of this chapter.

What are the rights of an apostle? Paul contended that apostles have the right to make a living from their ministry and to have a wife who travels with them. However, it seems that some members of the Corinthian church questioned whether Barnabas and Paul were free to do these things. They wondered whether ministers of the Gospel should have to work a regular job like the people they were shepherding. These thoughts may have stemmed from some of the divisions within their church. However, it’s also likely that the false apostles had fleeced the flock, creating a negative sentiment toward those who would earn their living from their ministry.

Nonetheless, in verse five, Paul pointed out that Peter (Cephas) and several of the other Apostles had wives and made a living from their ministries. He built his argument starting with the Law.

“For it is written in the law of Moses, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.’ Is it oxen God is concerned about?”
– 1 Corinthians 9:9 (NKJV)

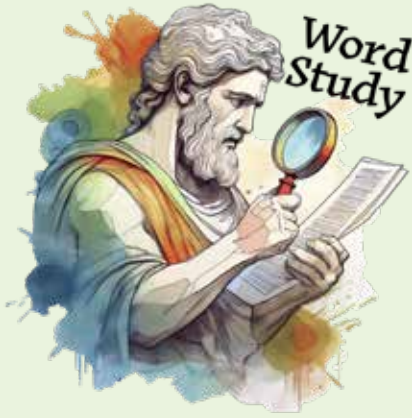
Then, in verse fourteen, Paul argues that Jesus taught this as well. He did not include a quotation, leading us to assume that the Corinthian readers would have been familiar with the command he is referencing. It appears he was alluding to Matthew 10:10 and Luke 10:7 when Jesus sent out his disciples to preach, instructing them to take no money, for a laborer deserves his food.¹ In other words, the individuals who welcomed the disciples and benefited from their ministry would provide for them.

Paul wasn’t constructing this argument for a paid clergy for its own sake. He was comparing a legitimate right that he and Barnabas could exercise to the rights and freedoms that the mature believers were insisting upon from chapter eight.



If the Word of God grants you the right to do something, are you ever wrong for exercising that right?

¹ Ciampa, R. E., & Rosner, B. S. (2010). The First Letter to the Corinthians (pp. 413–415). William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.



Stewardship (9:17)

[*oikonomia* (eu-kono-mee-a)]

Oikonomia occurs 9 times in the New Testament and is translated in the ESV as “stewardship,” “management,” and “plan.” Broadly, the word is used with regard to the administration of a household or estate. Luke used it in the parable of the dishonest manager (Luke 16). Paul employed it more in the sense of how one administers the grace given for one’s ministry (Col 1:25) or regarding the Lord’s plan for the mystery of the Gospel (Eph 1:10).

Paul Would Rather Die //

“But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting.” – 1 Corinthians 9:15

Have you ever said, “I would rather die than...” fill in the blank? We all have at one point or another. For Paul, he would rather die than be paid for his ministry. But didn’t he just build the biblical case in favor of it? Yes. Paul called his free preaching the grounds for his boasting. Perhaps the false apostles had something to do with that. It’s possible that they collected large sums and promised miracles if you gave sacrificially.

Though that’s a bit of speculation, it fits. It happens today as well. Rather than suffer guilt by association, Paul distanced himself from such practices. He preached for free, and when there were miracles, they were free too. This was a personal conviction for Paul. Wolves soon attacked many of the churches he planted after his departure. He warned the Ephesian elders that this would happen (Acts 20:29). By requiring no compensation, he distinguished his ministry from the wolves who followed him.

The question becomes this: When should a minister do as Paul did? This is a matter of contextualization. Ministers do not sin when they make their living from their ministry. However, Paul demonstrated that there are times when it is better to make a living in another way while ministering free of charge. This is his personal example of how not to destroy a weaker brother’s conscience. It cost him personally, and at times, it likely created problems for him, but if it meant preserving the reputation of the Gospel, so be it. To prevent any offenses, he gladly laid aside his biblical right to a wage from the churches he served.



Have you ever given up rights for the sake of someone else's conscience? What did you give up? Why was it necessary?

Ongoing Discussion

"For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!"
– 1 Corinthians 9:16

In verse sixteen, Paul's wording is strong. He understood that the calling upon his life was to preach the Gospel. He described it as a necessity laid upon him. If he somehow disqualified himself and could no longer preach effectively, "Woe to me." When Jesus pronounced woes over the Pharisees or towns that rejected Him, it was a declaration of judgment. Here, Paul seems to imply that if he didn't fulfill the ministry to which he was called, he would face judgment from the Lord. In essence, preaching the Gospel was as fundamental to his life as breathing, which is why it was never a matter for him to refrain from charging. He would preach regardless, so it might as well be at no cost.

It's interesting how deeply Paul's calling penetrated his life. His life conformed to the calling, not the other way around. Whether he received a living from it wasn't the point. The point is that Jesus changed him so fundamentally that for him to live any other way would only serve to pile up woes for him.

The Lord doesn't call everyone to preach. But he calls each of us to something, and He provides us with the gifts necessary to do His calling. What have you done with your calling? What necessity from the Lord has been laid upon you? Ephesians 2:10 tells us that the Lord has prepared in advance good works for us to walk in. Are you walking in them? Secondly, do you know what the Lord called you to do, but you're not doing it? Paul believed it would be woeful for him to shirk or disqualify himself from the responsibility of preaching the Gospel. Are you laying up woe for yourself as you walk in willing disobedience?

Don't misunderstand. This isn't a judgment over your eternal salvation. It's a judgment of reward. Paul's ground for boasting – his reward – was intimately tied to fulfilling his ministry in a way that presented no obstacles for the Gospel (9:18). Whatever it is that the Lord has called you to do, you'll be held accountable



Free to Serve All People {9:19-27}

This passage features one of Paul’s most well-known statements: “I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some.” Our question is how this statement connects to the broader discussion about Christian liberties. Starting in chapter eight, Paul argued for giving up our rights to protect those with weaker faith. Then, in the first part of chapter nine, he shared how he personally applied this principle. Now, we will examine this statement and see how it fits within the larger context of the topic.



Have you ever been asked to do something that felt bigger than you?

Free to Serve //

“For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.” – 1 Corinthians 9:19

First, let’s clarify what Paul means by being free from all. He began chapter nine by rhetorically asking, “Am I not free?” In that sense, he referred to his freedom in Christ. He was no longer enslaved to the Law and the tyranny of relying on it for justification before the Lord (Galatians 2:16). However, there seems to be a broader meaning at work in verse nineteen. Paul was also free from obligations to other people. Because he refused to accept payment for his ministry, he was not beholden to wealthy patrons or entire congregations as someone would be if they were employed or supported that way. One might say, in modern terms, that Paul was a free agent, bound only by his conscience before the Lord to serve with integrity.

This freedom allowed Paul to do whatever he deemed necessary to be a faithful minister of the Gospel. What follows in verses twenty through twenty-two shows how he exercised this freedom. He could minister to Jews who still followed the Law, even though he knew he was free from it. He could also minister to Gentiles of any background who knew nothing about the Law, even though he understood that he was still under Christ's law.¹ And within the Body of Christ, he was able to connect with those who had weaker faith. His freedom gave him flexibility to respond to any situation he faced.

Paul's freedom to serve implies that we can trust the Lord to make us ready for the work prepared for us. Paul wasn't encumbered by his failures or his lack. Neither was he impressed by his own position, training, or education. He simply relied upon the Holy Spirit to lead him, equip him, and give him whatever was needed for the work at hand. He was free in a way that made him usable for all things and all people.



How have you measured your freedom in Christ? Does Paul's freedom to serve give you a new understanding of how free you are?

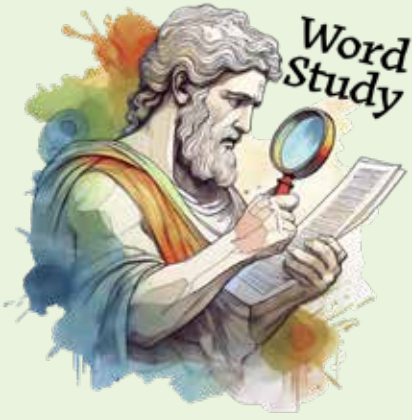
Free to Run

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.” – 1 Corinthians 9:24

Paul used an athletic analogy to further his point. Not only is he free, but now that he's free, there's no excuse to settle for mediocrity. The kind of freedom we've been talking about eliminates all reasons for lackluster participation. If you run poorly, it's not because the Lord hasn't provided everything you need to run with excellence. As free as you are to serve, you are equally free to run!

Mediocrity doesn't necessarily manifest as half-hearted. It often appears in subtler ways. A mediocre effort might be energetic and ambitious, but without organization, the result will fall short. You've probably seen people like this. They have great vision but lack follow-through. They come up with big ideas but never focus on the practical details of how they'll work in reality. There's nothing wrong with being a visionary or having

¹ Although there is much discussion of the law of Christ, it can be broadly summed up by Jesus' teachings in Matthew 22:34-40 and John 13:34-35. These contain the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets and will serve as the identifying behavior of Christ's disciples.



Free (9:19) [*eleutheros* (eh-LEH-theros)]

Eleutheros occurs 23 times in the New Testament and is translated in the ESV as “free,” and “freedom.” It means not bound, to have liberty, to be free. Jesus used it in His statement, “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (Jn 8:36) Elsewhere, by other New Testament authors, it is used almost exclusively in the sense of those who are not slaves, which extends to slavery in the societal sense and in the sense of spiritual slavery to the Law.

big ideas. But without the discipline to handle the details or the company of detail-oriented people, the results tend to be mediocre. Lots of sound and fury, but short on delivery.

Paul’s solution to mediocrity – whether in zeal or administration – was self-discipline. This goes well beyond willpower. Willpower alone doesn’t finish the race.

“But I discipline my body and subjugate it, lest somehow after preaching to others, I myself should become disqualified.” – 1 Corinthians 9:27 (LEB)

Disciplining the body isn’t about extreme ascetic practices. Think of it as retraining its muscle memory. Our bodies naturally develop automatic responses for quick reactions. You can also train your body to respond automatically to situations. A natural, automatic response might be putting your hands out to break a fall. A trained automatic response could be compared to a basketball player shooting a basket. There’s a specific way to hold the ball, an optimal position for your hands on the ball, the correct alignment of your arms with the ball, the proper focus of your eyes, and even the way the seams on the ball align with your hand when you shoot. A skilled basketball player doesn’t even consciously think about these details. In a split second, the ball and body are oriented and the shot is made instinctively, without deliberate thought about the mechanics of shooting a basketball.

Paul retrained his body’s responses to the pressures and situations in his life. Through the renewal of his mind (Romans 12:2), the reorientation of his thoughts (Philippians 4:8), an unceasing prayer life (1 Thessalonians 5:17), and the intentional discovery of his gifts (1 Corinthians 12:31, 14:1), Paul reprogrammed his body’s automatic reactions. His body was prepared to respond in Christ-like ways instead of Paul-like ways.



How much effort have you put into transforming your body's automatic reactions to the problems and pressures of life? Do your automatic responses interfere with how you run?

Ongoing Discussion

*“So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.”
– 1 Corinthians 9:26*

Running aimlessly doesn't seem like a good solution for anything. However, it accurately describes the spiritual lives of many Christians. Being aimless doesn't mean you lack vision; it just means you lack a clear path to reach the goal. A big clue that you lack a clear path is when you often find yourself exhausted, but you're not making any progress.

Paul refused to run aimlessly. He trained his whole self and reoriented his life to the calling Christ placed on him. It sounds simple, but having a clear sense of calling is one thing; walking it out with endurance is another. How many believers have felt the Lord call them to a purpose, only to fizzle out or disqualify themselves before finishing the race? Fizzling out and disqualification are both signs of taking shortcuts in your disciplines.

A well-disciplined life will not fizzle out or disqualify itself from the Lord's calling. The believer who masters this will find their inner self renewed each day, even if the outside is wearing out. Paul lived this and called everyone who would hear his teachings to do the same. Troubles and difficulties are assumed. They will come to the undisciplined and disciplined alike. Only one of those will be equipped to endure.

*“Therefore we do not lose heart, but even if our outer person is being destroyed, yet our inner person is being renewed day after day.”
– 2 Corinthians 4:16 (LEB)*



Idolatry & Tables {10:1-22}

On the surface, it might seem like Paul changed direction. For two chapters, we’ve been reading about Paul’s teachings on Christian rights and how we should surrender them to serve and love others. Then, suddenly, he shifts to a warning against idolatry. Is this related to that? Consider this: what are we doing when we refuse to lay down our rights? We idolize them. We make idols—little gods—out of the way we believe we should be able to live. This warning against idolatry is squarely aimed at our desire to keep our rights.



Upfront, do you believe you have idolized any of your Christian liberties?

Wilderness Rebels //

“Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.” – 1 Corinthians 10:6

Chapter ten begins with a reflection on Israel’s wilderness wanderings. Paul reminded the Corinthians that their ancestors, the Jewish fathers, all experienced the same deliverance in the wilderness. They all passed through the sea, which served as their “baptism” into Moses (10:2). They all ate manna and drank water from rocks (10:3-4). And they were all receiving spiritual drink from the Rock, whom Paul revealed was Christ

(10:4). Yet many of them were overthrown in the wilderness for their lack of faith (10:5). They grumbled against Moses, against the Lord, and the Lord swore in his wrath that they would not enter His rest.¹

However, this was more than just a history lesson. Paul understood that what happened to them serves as a warning for us. He equated their evil desires with idolatry. To put it simply, they wanted things their way despite saying they would do things the Lord’s way. Wanting things your way instead of His is idolatry. Now, bring the analogy full circle: exercising our rights at the expense of another’s conscience is idolatry, and Paul strongly warns against it.

“We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.” – 1 Corinthians 10:9–10

Therefore, we must view our sinful desires in the proper light. When we insist on our rights and exercise them at the expense of a weaker brother, we become idolaters. We cannot claim to be under grace as an excuse for our choices because our actions are not gracious toward the one whose faith is being destroyed (8:11). It is in this context that we are warned that when we think we are standing, we must watch out lest we fall (10:12). Also, in this context, we are reminded that no temptation is too strong to resist because the Lord will provide a way out so we can endure it (10:13).



Regarding the exercise of your rights, how does your perspective need to change? Are Paul’s warnings of destruction a game-changer?

Tables of Demons

*“No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons.”
– 1 Corinthians 10:20*

In verse fourteen, Paul returned the focus to the topic that initiated this entire discussion: eating meat from pagan temples. “Flee from idolatry.” His call to flee is based on a core idea that he will explain more in chapter

¹ Psalm 95:11

twelve. We are the Body of Christ. We share the same cup, eat the same bread. We are one body, and each person is a member of that body. Therefore, what you do affects your neighbor, and vice versa, because we are one.

Within the Corinthian church, the issue wasn't just about buying meat at the market that had been offered in pagan temples. The real problem was that to acquire that meat, one had to participate in the activities at the pagan temple. This is clear from Paul's comparison to the people of Israel.

“Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?” – 1 Corinthians 10:18 (NKJV)

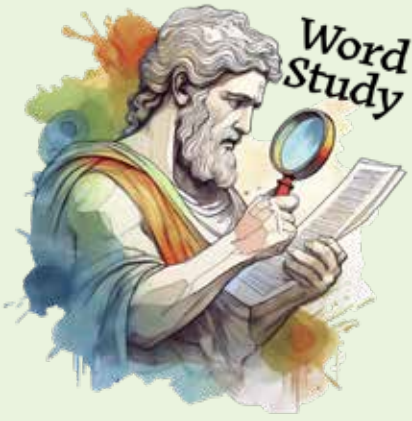
The only people allowed to eat the sacrifices were those involved in offering them. This highlights the core of the offense regarding weaker brothers in chapter eight. It wasn't the meat itself, but how they accessed it. However, Paul goes further. Even if they are correct, and these so-called “gods” aren't really God (8:4-5), there are demons behind their worship. Participating in their sacrifices, even in unbelief, is eating at the table of demons. This should never be the case for any believer.

*“You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.”
– 1 Corinthians 10:21*

Paul's instruction here also destroys syncretism. You cannot harmonize opposing worldviews. You cannot incorporate things from Islam, Judaism, and Christianity into a coherent belief system. Nor can anyone rationalize participation in things of darkness while claiming to be children of the Light. In 2 Corinthians 6:14, Paul asked a rhetorical question: “What fellowship has light with darkness?” It doesn't. They oppose each other and cannot be harmonized.



Have you considered that exercising your rights may lead to participation at the table of demons?



Partake (10:21) [metechō (meh-TEH-ho)]

Metechō occurs 8 times in the New Testament, and is translated in the ESV as “sharing,” “share,” “partake,” “partook,” “live,” and “belonged.” It means to share, to participate, to belong to, or to eat. It appears only in 1 Corinthians and Hebrews, and is used almost exclusively in the sense of something shared in community, whether a meal, or a share of crops, or a tribal identity.

Ongoing Discussion

“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” – 1 Corinthians 10:14

Because this verse is often used to refer to any temptation, the immediate context is frequently overlooked. The temptation here is to destroy a weaker brother’s faith by prioritizing your rights in an idolatrous way. Essentially, some Corinthians wanted a steak so badly they were willing to “fake it” at a pagan temple, thereby offending the consciences of younger believers. While this isn’t what we typically face in the 21st-century West, we aren’t foreign to the concept of entitlement.

We often believe we deserve certain things. If you are entitled to something, it’s not necessarily a bad thing, but we often view it negatively. “I deserve a break today.” Perhaps you do, but who objectively determines if you truly deserve it? Entitlement is problematic because we subjectively decide for ourselves what we deserve without considering how it affects others.

These Corinthians felt entitled to a steak, so much so that they would risk destroying their brother’s faith and ruining their witness. When we view it in that light, it isn’t hard to search our souls for similar entitlements. They are there, and we must bring them before the Lord and determine if they are worth it.



All Things for Him {10:23-11:1}

With all of his major points made, in these closing verses of chapter ten, Paul summarizes what he had been trying to say since the beginning of chapter eight. However, even in this summary, there are some truths that may be difficult for some to accept. As we look at them, be sure to examine your heart toward others with whom you disagree on matters of Christian liberty.



Within this larger discussion, what has the Lord shown you regarding the exercise and understanding of your rights?

Liberty vs. Conscience

“Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.”
– 1 Corinthians 10:24

Paul brought up that quote again: “All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful (10:23). He mentioned it earlier (6:12) in his teaching against sexual immorality. He brought it up once more here regarding our liberties. The Kingdom way is to prioritize the good of others over our own. However, Paul doesn’t give an inch regarding the mature understanding that all meats are permissible for Christians to eat.

“Eat everything that is sold in the meat market, [asking no questions] for the sake of the conscience, for ‘the earth is the Lord’s, and its fullness.’” –
1 Corinthians 10:25–26 (LEB)

Nor does he relent on the truth that the mature should bear with the weak in a loving way by refraining from eating the meats in question.

“But if someone says to you, ‘This is offered to idols,’ do not eat it, for the sake of that one who informed you and the conscience.”
– 1 Corinthians 10:28 (LEB)

Here is one of the more challenging tensions in Christian community. We observe this issue in various ways within the Western Evangelical church. A simple example is alcohol. On one side, there are the “teetotalers” who abstain from all alcoholic beverages, and on the other, believers who permit alcohol as long as there is no drunkenness. Those who allow alcohol are like the meat-eaters in Corinth. They recognize that there’s no sin in having a drink if they do so responsibly and avoid the harmful effects of alcohol. The teetotalers are like those who eat only vegetables because they see alcohol as linked to sinful excess and drunkenness, or because of a personal history with alcoholism.

The main point Paul emphasizes is to respond with love. If you feel at liberty to eat or drink, do so, but not at the expense of a brother’s conscience. And if you don’t feel free to eat or drink, when you discover that your brother does, don’t judge him. However, it’s clear that in these situations, it’s the liberated brother who feels the most “loss” because he is the one denying himself. That’s why Paul included an important nuance in his argument.

“I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else’s conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?”
– 1 Corinthians 10:29–30

Just because you’re the one giving up your rights doesn’t mean you’re wrong. You don’t have to change your beliefs about food and drink just because a weaker believer questions your understanding. If you are eating and drinking with gratitude to the Lord, there is no condemnation for your participation. However, the way of love requires us to change our behavior for their benefit.



Why do we find it so difficult to abstain from something for the sake of another’s conscience?

The Glory of God

“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” – 1 Corinthians 10:31

This verse holds significant power. It provides a way to determine if an activity is worth the effort. First, Paul exploded the application of his point to “whatever you do.” That indicates that the principle he’s been promoting has broad, life-wide application. Whether the liberty in question is about food, drink, holidays, work, hobbies, entertainment, you name it, this principle applies.

If it cannot be done in a way that glorifies the Lord, don’t do it.

Clearly, if there are written commandments against something, it is impossible to do it in a way that glorifies the Lord. It will always be sinful. However, the focus of the last three chapters has not been on clear commandments but on matters of conscience. And in these, the only command we are given is to respond in love to our brother. But when we expand this principle to all matters of conscience and liberty, it brings everything into a new light.

Can you eat and drink with liberty and also glorify the Lord? Can you take part in civic activities and also glorify the Lord? Can you play travel sports and glorify the Lord through them? Can you glorify the Lord as you attend a concert or a movie? These are all matters of personal conscience that we must address. In Romans 14, Paul taught, concerning the same principles, that we must be fully convinced in our minds because whatever doesn’t proceed from faith is sin.¹

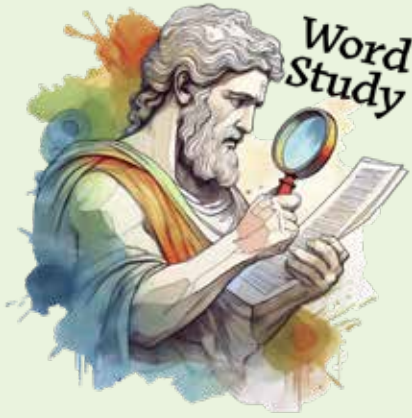


Take a moment to survey the things you’ve involved yourself with. Do they pass the test of whether you can glorify the Lord in or through them?

Imitate Me

“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” – 1 Corinthians 11:1

¹ Romans 14:5b, 23



Conscience (10:25) [*syneidēsis* (si-NEE-de-sis)]

Syneidēsis occurs 28 times in the New Testament, and is translated in the ESV as “conscience,” “consciousness,” “association,” and “mindful.” It means the consciousness of anything, awareness of information about something, attentiveness, or the soul as distinguishing between what is morally good and bad, commending one and condemning the other.

First, congratulations to modern Bible translators for making a chapter break one verse too early. Though this verse is the first verse of chapter eleven, it is believed to be the closing statement of Paul’s teachings in chapter ten. And though his call for the Corinthians to imitate him as He follows Christ can apply to the contents of the whole letter, it makes the best sense to be the bookend of his teachings on Christian liberty and conscience.

After saying to do all for the glory of God, he turned to what that looks like. Give no offense to anyone, whether Greek or Jew or the church. Paul said he tries to please everyone by not seeking his own advantage. He’s not a people pleaser in the sense that he’s overly concerned about how others perceive him or how they feel about what he says. Instead, he puts their needs ahead of his own, making sure there are no grounds for them to accuse him of selfishness or self-interest. This is what Paul hopes we will imitate. We should not allow anyone to accuse us or defame the Lord’s name because of our actions toward others or in how they perceive our treatment of them. As a pastor once said, if you have neighbors who don’t believe in the Lord and are hostile toward Him, they should still see you as the best neighbor they’ve ever had. Share the truth and love them well.



Would your neighbor consider you their best neighbor?

Ongoing Discussion

“If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.” – 1 Corinthians 10:27

This verse presents a challenge. If you’ve ever been on a foreign mission trip, you were probably advised to eat whatever your hosts prepare. This verse is commonly the source of that advice (though it is being misapplied). Clearly, if you have allergies or a condition that restricts your diet, you should not eat anything that could hurt you. However, many people do not have these issues and are simply faced with eating something they might not like.

But, in this context, this wasn’t about meals with foreigners in a foreign land. This was about the unbelieving people who live nearby. If you had a Muslim neighbor who invited you over for a barbecue, and you discovered that he was cooking with halal² meat, this is the scenario that Paul had in mind. Eat whatever is put before you, with no objections over conscience, because the Kingdom work to accomplish is greater than your conscience’s objections.

However, verse twenty-eight states that if you bring a believing friend to the barbecue who objects because it violates his conscience, and you cannot reason with him, then you should decline for his sake. So, you see, this isn’t a clear-cut, one-size-fits-all situation.

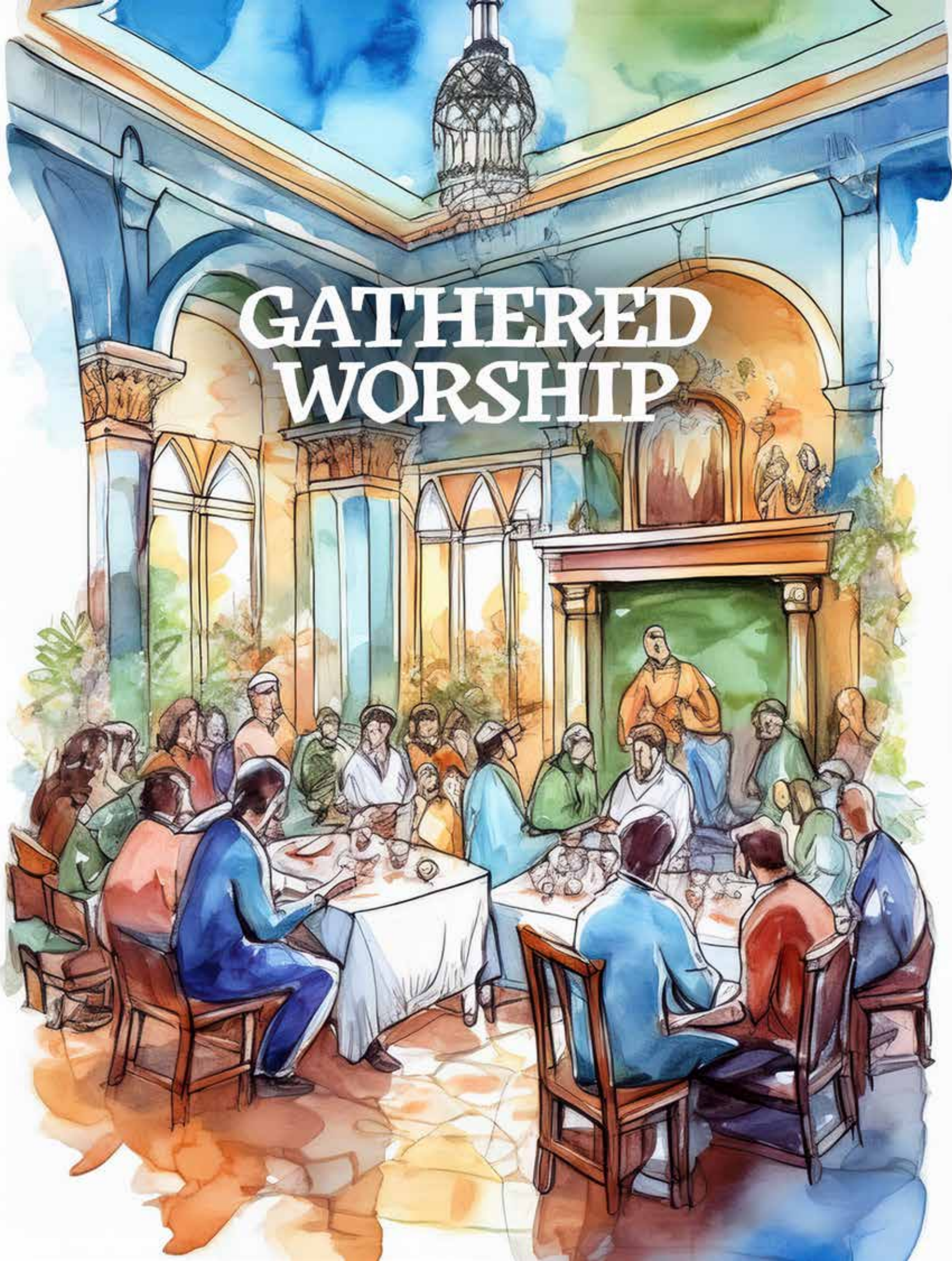
These aren’t always straightforward answers. You need to ask yourself whether your conscience about food or drink outweighs the opportunity to share the Gospel. Additionally, if other believers are present, you must also consider whether their consciences could be offended if you participate. In many ways, this complexity works against our desire for simplicity. And it becomes yet another way to crucify the flesh in every situation.



How might your desire for a simple faith become an issue of idolatry?

² Food that is prepared according to Islamic law.

GATHERED WORSHIP



"But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.."

"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."

"Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy."

Chapters 11-14 focus in on our worship gatherings. When the church gathers to worship, how should we conduct ourselves? What is appropriate? What should be discouraged? These chapters give us a peek into a typical worship gathering in Corinth. Paul spent most of these chapters offering corrections for their worship gatherings related to their personal attire, how they celebrated the Lord's Supper, and the exercise of spiritual gifts. Within will be some hard topics, but the Lord will guide us through them.

Here's a preview of what's ahead.

- Men and women should be submissive to the Lord in their appearance.
- The Lord's Supper should be taken with respect and in a worthy manner.
- Spiritual gifts are diverse and are intended for building up the Church.
- All spiritual gifts are important and no one has all of them.
- Love is greater than being gifted.
- We should earnestly desire spiritual gifts.
- Worship gatherings should be intelligible to outsiders.
- The Lord desires order in our gatherings.



Do you consider your church's worship gatherings biblical?



Signs of Submission {11:2-16}

Of everything we will cover in this unit, this passage is the most challenging. The ESV Bible titles this passage “Head Coverings,” but don’t let the title cause you to skip it. Many Christians are unfamiliar with the topic of head coverings for two reasons. First, their churches don’t take a stance on the issue. Second, when it is discussed, this passage is often dismissed as a cultural matter that no longer has a literal application. In the latter case, the subject is frequently treated allegorically in an attempt to interpret the meaning of the head covering discussion in a context where the practice is no longer common. Surprisingly, an honest look at this passage will help us understand issues that come up later in the letter.



Have you ever seriously considered Paul’s teaching on head coverings?

Headship

“But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.”

– 1 Corinthians 11:3

After a brief commendation for their faithfulness to the traditions he taught them, Paul jumped from the frying pan into the fire. (Well, it probably wasn’t a fiery debate for them, but it is for us.) There are two questions we must answer to move forward with our examination.

- What does “head” mean?
- Is Paul talking about men and women in general or husbands and wives?

The Greek word translated as head is *kephalé*, which, when not referring to the physical body part, can mean both **authority** and **source**.¹ Scholars are divided on which interpretation Paul intended here. Those who believe it refers to authority usually do so because of Paul’s reference to the created order in verse eight. Those who interpret it as source argue that it was the more common usage of the word in Greek literature and the Septuagint.

Your choice of definition will influence how you interpret verse three. If you see it as source, what does that imply about God being the head of Christ? Is Christ’s existence derived from the Father? How does source affect our understanding of Christ’s divine nature? Is He fully God if His source is God? Does that suggest a dependence that diminishes His divinity? On the other hand, if you interpret it as authority, how does that impact the roles of husbands and wives? Are wives subordinate to their husbands? Is Christ subordinate to the Father? Does subordinate mean inferior? Each position presents challenges to consider.

The complementarian view of headship best explains verse three and does not diminish Christ’s divinity. Christ is equal with the Father and the Spirit, therefore equal in authority, but He is also meek and chose to subordinate Himself, taking on the form of a servant, and submitting Himself to death on a cross.²

The question of whom Paul is addressing stems from the Greek. The ESV makes an interpretive choice by using husband and wife, but the Greek actually says man and woman. This is reflected in more literal translations.

“But I want you to know that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of the woman, and the head of Christ is God.”
– 1 Corinthians 11:3 (LEB)

However, the interpretive choice made by the ESV is contextually correct. All men in general aren’t the heads of all women in general. It would be inappropriate for one wife’s husband also to be the head of another husband’s wife, and so on.

So, according to Christ’s example, headship means authority. It’s not based on the wife’s perceived inferiority or the husband’s greater strength but on the meekness of Christ, who, though equal, chose to submit Himself to the Father, making the Father His head. Christ is therefore the model for both the husband and the wife. He

¹ Brown, D. R., & Twist, E. T. (2013). 1 Corinthians (J. D. Barry & D. Mangum, Eds.; 1 Co 11:3). Lexham Press.

² Philippians 2:5-8

is submitted to the Father, and He is the Head of the Church. With this foundation, we can proceed through the rest of this passage.



In God's kingdom, how does authority work?

Head Coverings

“Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven.”

– 1 Corinthians 11:4–5

We must clarify an important distinction upfront. What follows in this passage—and the upcoming chapters—is a discussion about conduct during our worship gatherings, not in the privacy of our homes, in public, or any other formal setting. This pertains to when the Body of Christ comes together to worship. Specifically, these instructions are for praying and prophesying during the gathering.

The instruction is twofold. When praying or prophesying, men should not cover their heads, and women should. In each case, whether men cover or women do not, their heads are dishonored. In light of verse three, this likely doesn't refer to their physical heads but to their spiritual heads. In the headship flowchart, husbands dishonor Christ when they cover their heads, and wives dishonor their husbands when they do not cover their heads.

A popular explanation for this passage is that it is purely cultural and not relevant for the church today. That view is very Western. Over the past 125 years, Western Europe, the British Empire, and the Americas experienced a revolution for women's rights. While much of that revolution led to just changes, its spillover into the church had unexpected effects. Historically, questioning this passage in church life is quite new, yet here we are. Do women need to wear head coverings when they pray and prophesy? Is this just a cultural issue from the days of the Corinthians, or was it an accepted practice in church life until very recently in history? Is it a purely cultural matter, or is this how the Lord prescribes things for all times and cultures?

That said, even when considering cultural matters, they didn't take precedence because Paul appealed to the created order in verses eight and nine.

“For man is not from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man.” – 1 Corinthians 11:8–9 (NKJV)

Appeals to the created order usually suggest that what is being taught transcends time and culture. So, we in the West face a dilemma. Do we believe that head coverings are prescribed by the Lord, or is the Lord describing what was true in Corinth at that time? And by the way, while women tend to get most of the attention on this issue, men are also instructed to uncover their heads for a reason. While it's not clear in the cultural context why Paul felt it necessary to tell men to uncover their heads, the practical application for us today would be simple. Men, remove your hats.

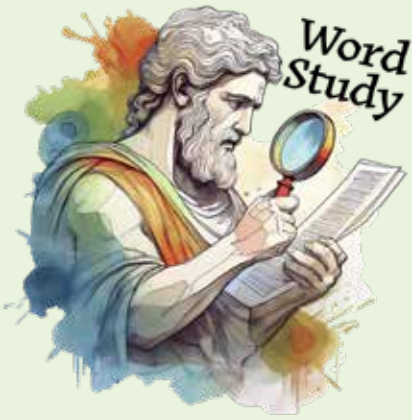
Before moving on, it would be wise to address one more point. What about unmarried or widowed women? We previously established that verse three refers to husbands and wives, not men and women in general. Since local churches are likely composed of families, your gathering will include children and possibly many unmarried young men and women. To clarify, a young unmarried woman still under her father's care would look to her father as her head. The idea of an unmarried woman living independently from her father's household wouldn't be common in the first century. But eventually, her father would pass away, and if she remained unmarried, what then? She, like widows, would have Christ as her head. Would she then wear a head covering? Yes, because the act of showing honor to your head, whether a husband or Christ directly, is still relevant.



Regarding prayers and prophecy in our worship gatherings, why does it really matter whether we cover or uncover our heads?

Glory

“For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man.” – 1 Corinthians 11:7



Uncovered (11:5)

[*akatakalyptos* (a-kata-KA-lip-tos)]

Akatakalyptos occurs 2 times in the New Testament, and both times is translated in the ESV as “uncovered.” It means not covered or unveiled. It appears only in 1 Corinthians and is a compound word; the prefix “a” which is a negative in the sense of amoral (without morals), “kata” which, depending on context, means downward or down from, and “kalyptos” which means to cover up. A literal way to translate could be, “not downward covering.”

The primary issue here is the glory of Lord. This is why men ought not cover their heads because they are created in the image of God. Yet, Paul follows that with the woman is the glory of man. What does that mean? First, it cannot and does not mean women aren’t created in God’s image. Women bear the image of the Lord just as much as men. Genesis chapter one says as much.

“So God created humankind in his image, in the likeness of God he created him, male and female he created them.” – Genesis 1:27 (LEB)

In this case, although *kephalé* is not used here, the idea of “source” comes through loud and clear: woman was made from man. The Lord took her from the man’s side and fashioned her.³ Paul’s intent here is still rooted in the created order. So, in the case of how wives glorify the Lord by wearing a head covering, they do so by bringing honor to their husbands. This reasoning continues to flow well with the headship flowchart established in verse three. Some scholars even believe the head covering keeps the focus on God’s glory because, according to verse fifteen, a woman’s glory is her long hair. So, the covering serves to keep the focus on God’s glory.⁴

Finally, in verses fourteen and fifteen, Paul appealed to nature. Even nature shows us that long hair on a man is disgraceful and a woman’s long hair is glorious. The glory of her long hair should be kept for her husband and not serve to distract others when we gather for worship. This doesn’t mean women are entirely responsible for men’s sexual distractions. Men are responsible for controlling their own eyes to stay pure. But as mentioned earlier, done for God’s glory, wives honor their husbands by covering their own glory for the Lord’s glory to be seen above all.

³ Genesis 2:21-22

⁴ Brown, D. R., & Twist, E. T. (2013). 1 Corinthians (J. D. Barry & D. Mangum, Eds.; 1 Co 11:7). Lexham Press.



If God's glory is the primary focus of our gatherings, what things can we do to keep our attention fixed there?

What Should We Do? //

"If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God." – 1 Corinthians 11:16

Paul concluded his remarks on head coverings by essentially saying, "If you disagree with me, I don't know what to say; this is how the churches of God do this." As American evangelical churches, we have, for the most part, moved away from this practice. We must ask ourselves if we are in sin for doing so. If not, what is the justification for that conclusion? Is that justification sound and based upon a reasonable interpretation of the New Testament? Or is it based on our preferences?

Jesus established two ordinances for local churches to observe: the Lord's Supper and water baptism. Any gathering of believers calling themselves a church must practice these rites. Head coverings are not an ordinance for the church because Christ did not "order" them. However, departures from "the traditions" that Paul delivered to us need to be built on a solid foundation. Head coverings fall into this category of traditions (see 11:2). Doctrines do not change; they remain the same. Traditions, though they likely have good reasons, aren't as unwavering.

In light of this, it appears that local churches have the freedom to choose whether to use head coverings or not. However, the decision should not be driven by cultural trends.



Do you believe we've been too quick to toss traditions in attempts to remain culturally relevant?

Ongoing Discussion

“That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.” – 1 Corinthians 11:10

Here’s what everyone really wants to know. What do head coverings have to do with angels? To make sense of such a statement, we can only gather intel from what is written elsewhere. Consider the following.

- We are created lower than angels. (Psalm 8:5)
- We will eventually judge angels. (1 Corinthians 6:3)
- Angels long to understand the Lord’s grace toward us. (1 Peter 1:12)
- They occasionally come among us in disguise to test us. (Hebrews 13:2)

These four truths provide a plausible understanding of verse ten. Angels are curious about us humans, who will eventually be lifted above them to act as judges of their rebel siblings. Therefore, in preparation for our exaltation, they observe us as we are now to learn humility. Part of that observation involves coming among us in disguise to gain firsthand experience of how Jesus has transformed us.

Perhaps these head coverings are a part of that examination. They are observing us, analyzing how we submit ourselves. The symbol of authority that head coverings represent is possibly one way the angels learn submission for their future. But head covering or not, it seems that angels are learning about gracious submission as they observe.



Have you ever considered that we are an object lesson for the heavenly hosts?

What You Should Know

This passage is difficult, but hopefully easier to understand now. And we didn’t even get to everything! (We’ll be referencing this chapter later when we discuss women remaining silent in worship gatherings.) Head coverings are traditions that Paul taught, but not doctrines or ordinances that determine a local church’s legitimacy. Still, even as a tradition, they should be given due consideration as a regular practice rather



The LORD'S Supper {11:17-34}

Moving on to the next matter, Paul quickly telegraphed his intentions. He was clearly displeased. The passage we'll examine today has three movements. First, Paul identified the issue: factions and how they observed the Lord's Supper. Second, he reminded them of what he had previously taught, including its meaning and significance. Lastly, he issued a warning along with his correction. The main point is the manner and spirit in which we should observe the Lord's Supper, which should encourage each of us to examine our own hearts.



Have you ever given much thought to how you observe the Lord's Supper?

Despising the Church

*"When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat."
- 1 Corinthians 11:20*

It may help to remember that, during this period in church history, most worship gatherings still occurred in the homes of wealthier believers who could host larger groups. According to Acts 18:7, when Paul shook out his garments in the synagogue, he then started holding church meetings at the house of Titius Justus, whose home was next to the synagogue. We can only assume that as their numbers increased, the number of homes where they met also grew.

The Lord's Supper is a time to remember. We remember what Jesus did. We reflect on how His death was a substitutionary atonement, where He suffered the wrath that our sins deserve in our place – as our substitute. This is why Paul wrote elsewhere that Christ, who knew no sin, became sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God.²

We remember that the cross was also Christ's victory. This is called Christus Victor. We learned in chapter two that this was hidden from the rulers of this age, else they would not have crucified Jesus.

“None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” – 1 Corinthians 2:8

Christus Victor is His victory over the rulers of this age, the powers of evil at work in the world, which He accomplished on the cross through the breaking of His body and the shedding of His blood. This was done in the “hidden wisdom”³ of the Father's plan, deceiving Satan to kill Jesus, which would be his undoing when Christ resurrected⁴

The question that has persisted within the global Church is whether the Lord's Supper is more than just an act of remembrance. Roman Catholics see the Lord's Supper as a means of grace, meaning we receive the Father's grace through participation in it.⁵ They also believe that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Jesus once we consume them. This is called transubstantiation. There are differing views within the Protestant church. Protestants reject transubstantiation but debate whether Christ is spiritually present in the supper or if it is strictly symbolic with no spiritual presence.

For our purposes, the clear teachings of Scripture are threefold: the bread and cup symbolize Christ's body and His blood, whenever we partake, we do so in remembrance of what He has done, and when we partake, we proclaim His death until He returns.



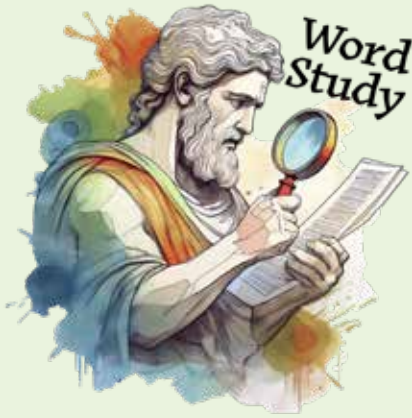
When you take the Lord's Supper, what is on your mind?
According to Scripture, what should we be thinking about?

² 2 Corinthians 5:21

³ 1 Corinthians 2:7

⁴ Henderson, J. J. (2016). Substitution. In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.

⁵ Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches observe sacraments, which is a rite that is a means, or way in which we receive, grace. Evangelical churches prefer the use of the word ordinance instead of sacrament, since we believe grace is given freely to believers through Christ alone, not the observance of rites.



Unworthy Manner (11:27) [anaxiōs (a-nax-SEE-os)]

Anaxiōs occurs once in the New Testament, and is translated in the ESV as “unworthy manner.” It is a variant of anxios, which means “unfit”, but the emphasis (ō) over the end of the word gives it more specificity. Anaxios appears in 1 Cor 6:2 and is translated as “incompetent.” Anaxiōs specifies to mean an “irreverent” or “unworthy” manner. The implication is that Paul was criticizing for taking the Lord’s Supper unworthily.

Take Heed

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.”

– 1 Corinthians 11:27

What does it mean to take the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner? Paul told the Corinthians that some of their members had become sick and even died, because they were unworthy in their observance of the Lord’s Supper (11:30). Due to the potential severity of the consequences, determining what Paul meant by “unworthy manner” is critical.

Some believe that within the broader context of this passage, “unworthy manner” refers to the disunity of their church. This includes not only the factions over teachers from earlier chapters but also the divisions between the haves and the have-nots. Some ate full meals and got drunk, while others went hungry. If this is true, then there is a congregational responsibility to recognize when their fellowship is divided and abstain from observing the Lord’s Supper until reconciliation can occur.

Others believe that “unworthy manner” extends beyond the passage to include any individual or corporate unrepentant behavior that isn’t Christlike. This means congregations and individual believers have a responsibility to examine their hearts for any unrepentant sin before they partake.

Considering both perspectives, it seems we should approach the Lord’s Supper with both ideas in mind. Neither congregational unity nor individual Christlikeness will ever be perfect. However, we must come to the supper with a clear conscience before the Lord, having repented of what we know and doing all we can to live at peace with others (Romans 12:18).



In the past, have you approached the Lord's Supper with this level of circumspection? Having studied this more closely, how will your practice change?

Ongoing Discussion *////////////////////////////////////*

*"So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another."
- 1 Corinthians 11:33*

There is a discussion in the broader evangelical world about when, where, and how it is appropriate to take the Lord's Supper. How often should we observe the Lord's Supper? Weekly? Monthly? Quarterly? As it is felt necessary? Should the Lord's Supper only be observed within the context of a local congregation's worship gathering, or can it be observed in any setting where two or three believers are gathered? Finally, is it appropriate to observe the Lord's Supper as part of a larger meal, or should it be set apart as a separate act?

Some advocate for a very conservative approach. Many Baptist churches will observe the Lord's Supper quarterly, only during their worship gatherings. They choose quarterly because it's argued that doing it more often could make it routine, and only within worship gatherings because Paul was addressing the conduct of their worship services. Other evangelical churches might agree on the location but differ in frequency, ranging from weekly to monthly or every other month. However, some believe that Paul's teaching isn't limited by location. They hold that since where two or three are gathered, Christ is present, the Lord's Supper can be observed in the same way.

The key phrase is "when you come together." It suggests some regularity, but it doesn't specify how often. It also indicates that it's done together, but it doesn't clarify how many people make up "together." In the Corinthian context, it's probably a household event, but that's only because they met in homes. Did each household observe the supper on the same day, or did they have different frequencies, or did they simply do it every time they gathered?

The fact that they met in homes probably caused the Corinthians to add a full meal with the Lord's Supper. It was practical, but it resulted in those with less being excluded. Does Paul's correction mean that the Lord's Supper should be separate from regular meals?

These questions are left for individual believers and local congregations to interpret. There probably isn't one correct answer, but no matter how you choose to believe, there will always be wrong ways to practice that belief.



How does your church believe the Lord's Supper should be observed? Does your personal belief align with your church's approach?

What You Should Know //

Taking the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner is a serious matter. This simple ordinance of bread and wine carries profound significance. We are to remember what Jesus has done for us. While it is good to always remember His work daily, Jesus established this observance as a way for His church to honor Him through our gathered worship. To participate in an unworthy manner can bring potential temporal judgments upon oneself or the entire congregation. Here's what you should know.

- We should observe the Lord's Supper in unity, not division. (11:20-22)
- The Lord's Supper is a time for remembrance. (11:23-26)
- People should examine their hearts before participating in the Lord's Supper. (11:28)
- Taking the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner invites judgment. (11:30)





Gifts of the Spirit {12:1-11}

The topic of spiritual gifts is a lightning rod. Few topics have generated as much debate and disunity among believers. Some firmly believe that all spiritual gifts continue to function and are still relevant and active in the Church today. Then, others disagree by stating that miracles and the miraculous speaking gifts of prophecy and tongues have ceased (because they authenticated the ministries of the Apostles), but the rest of the gifts remain useful and active.

If we are people of the Book, then we must accept that the Scriptures do not teach the cessation of spiritual gifts before Christ's return. The arguments claiming that spiritual gifts have entirely or partially ceased frequently stem from extra-biblical arguments. If we truly adhere to Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone), then we must necessarily believe that the gifts have continued for the ongoing building up of the Church. Though some faithful believers differ, we will proceed through the following few chapters based on this belief.



If we hold to Sola Scriptura and the Scriptures teach us to pursue spiritual gifts, shouldn't we do exactly that?

What is the Confusion? //

"Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed." – 1 Corinthians 12:1

spiritual gifts come from the Holy Spirit, they can only manifest in those who are new creations in Christ. They are unique gifts that appear after someone is born again.

Second, to be considered a spiritual gift, it must benefit all. The ESV says they are given for the “common good.” This distinction is crucial because it helps us discern what is genuine. If spiritual gifts build up the local church, then things that seem spiritual but appear to serve an individual’s ambitions would not be true spiritual gifts. Can a spiritual gift, then, be misused? Since spiritual gifts depend on the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, when someone uses a gift for selfish reasons, the Spirit’s empowerment is missing. At that point, they are relying on their past experiences with the gifts rather than the Spirit’s present empowerment. Such misuses will eventually become evident because they lack genuine power from the Holy Spirit.

If a spiritual gift is for the common good, does that mean there’s no personal benefit at all? Anything meant for the common good will also benefit the individual. While it’s important to keep the church in mind when discussing spiritual gifts, it’s fair to say that using your gifts helps build up the body of Christ while also strengthening you in the process.

Third, because spiritual gifts are for the common good of the church, discovering them will happen in the context of your local church. The Lord gives your spiritual gifts according to His plans for using you to build His kingdom. Therefore, gift discovery occurs as you serve and is affirmed by the believers in your local church. Anyone outside of your local church does not possess the proximity to affirm your gifts. That’s not because they’re unwise, but simply because they aren’t present to witness your journey.

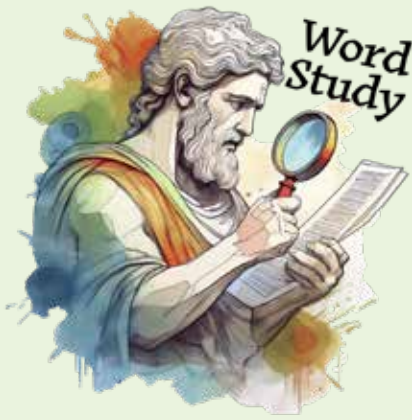


Do you know which spiritual gifts the Lord has manifested in your life?

Varieties of Gifts

“All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.” – 1 Corinthians 12:11

Verses eight through ten provide a sample of spiritual gifts, possibly ones Paul observed in Corinth during his stay. All of chapter twelve lists thirteen different spiritual gifts and is the longest list of gifts anywhere in the New Testament. Additionally, there are lists in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4.



Gifts (12:4)

[*charisma* (ha-rees-ma)]

Charisma occurs 17 times in the New Testament, and is translated in the ESV as "gift(s)," and once as "blessing." It is derived from the Greek word "charis" which is often translated as "grace." Charisma is used broadly to mean a gift of divine grace - grace gift - that ranges from the free gift of salvation (Rom 6:23) to blessings granted through prayers (2 Cor 1:11) to the usage here in 1 Corinthians 12 that speaks of manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 12

- Prophecy
- Service
- Teaching
- Exhortation
- Giving
- Leadership
- Mercy

1 Corinthians 12

- Wisdom
- Knowledge
- Faith
- Gifts of healing
- Miracles
- Prophecy
- Discerning of Spirits
- Tongues
- Interpretation of Tongues
- Apostles
- Teachers
- Helping
- Administration

Ephesians 4

- Apostles
- Prophets
- Evangelists
- Shepherds (Pastors)
- Teachers

The purpose of our study doesn't include providing a precise definition for each of these gifts, although in chapter fourteen, we will do so for tongues and prophecy since they receive particular attention. The question we should consider at this point is this: which of these does the Lord seem to use through me? And then, as a follow-up, how do I know if it's a natural ability or a spiritual gift?

Consider faith. Calling yourself a believer means you have faith. You believed the Gospel through faith and received eternal life in Christ. Faith is the essential act of being a Christian. What does it mean for faith to show up as a spiritual gift in someone who, by definition, already has faith? And let's complicate it further by saying this believer is naturally an optimist who tends to believe the best no matter what. What sets the spiritual gift of faith apart from a general tendency toward optimism?

First, not all faith is saving faith. Saving faith is what grants you entrance into the Lord’s family. The spiritual gift type of faith shows itself in moments of intense opposition. It can be faith directed at something personal or on behalf of someone else who is struggling. It stands in confident defiance of the odds, simply based on the belief that Jesus will deliver. Here, in these deep waters, optimism will give out. This is supernatural territory, and only supernatural faith will keep you afloat. And supernatural gift faith like this always sees the Lord come through because He’s the one giving it to you!

Therefore, to be a genuine spiritual gift, it will have supernatural empowerment with supernatural results, from the top to the bottom of the list. If it can be explained by any other means, then, though it may be a good thing, it’s not a spiritual gift. You may wonder how a gift like helping is supernatural, with supernatural results. On one hand, you won’t know unless you’re paying attention. But on the other hand, sometimes we must look beyond the immediate things we do to the bigger picture. Not every gift will seem supernatural standing alone, but in concert with everything else, it becomes an indispensable part of a supernatural outcome.



Are the lists of spiritual gifts found in the New Testament meant to be comprehensive?

Ongoing Discussion *////////////////////////////////////*

*“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.”
– 1 Corinthians 12:4–6*

Paul mentioned three things in these verses: gifts, service, and activities. While the temptation might be to take these as categorizations, that doesn’t seem to be Paul’s intent. Instead, Paul invoked the triune members of the Godhead to make a point. Just as the members of God are different, but also the same, so are spiritual gifts. All spiritual gifts have the same source and purpose. They come from the Lord for the common good of the church.

The tendency that we have to put spiritual gifts into categories isn’t new. Sorting things helps us organize and think more effectively. Some common ways to categorize the gifts are into three categories: service

gifts, speaking gifts, and sign gifts. These categories aren't inherently bad and can be helpful in some circumstances. However, overall, creating these categories may work against Paul's overarching theme in chapter twelve.

If all the gifts serve the same purpose – building others up – then why create categories? Why does it matter if some gifts focus on service and others on speaking? Categorizing gifts is the first step toward forming a kind of caste system where you have helpers, speakers, and sign-workers, and people are pigeonholed into these lanes. Also, because of the more overtly supernatural expression that some gifts take, it becomes easier to say this category is “normal” and the other is “miraculous.”

If we must categorize, then let's use a single category: supernatural. All gifts given by the Holy Spirit, by nature, aren't things we naturally possess; thus, by definition, they are supernatural gifts. Until we recognize that helping is just as supernatural as speaking in tongues, or giving as prophecy, we have an unbiblical view of the spiritual gifts.



Since giving is just as supernatural as prophecy, how should we distinguish the spiritual gift of giving from the normal expectation that Christians should be generous?

What You Should Know

Chapter twelve begins the longest discussion of spiritual gifts and their proper use in the entire Bible. Because the Scriptures teach us to expect these gifts, we have every reason to believe they are still available and useful for the common good of the church. Here's what you should know from the passage.

- A gift from the Holy Spirit will not curse Christ (12:3).
- As the Father, Son, and Spirit are equally God, but serve in different coequal roles, the gifts are all equally important, though they serve different functions (12:4-6).
- Each believer receives gifts from the Holy Spirit for the common good (12:7)
- Every gift comes from the Spirit according to His will (12:11).





Body Parts {12:12-31}

Paul's discussion of one body with many members might be his most memorable analogy in all of his letters. The Holy Spirit's distribution of spiritual gifts among believers can certainly make some gifts seem more useful or essential than others. Using the human body, he masterfully argued that every gift has its place and is important to the function of the whole. Therefore, in our worship gatherings, there is no room for jealousy over who has what gift because all are gifted for the common good of the entire body.



Have you ever felt like your gifts make no significant contribution to the health of your local church?

Spirit Baptism ////////////////////////////////////

*"For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit."
— 1 Corinthians 12:13*

Spirit baptism is a debated topic, but we can't discuss one body with many members without briefly examining it. There seems to be general agreement that this verse does not refer to water baptism, though a minority disagrees. Paul's statement draws from what John the Baptizer said of Jesus.

“John answered, saying to all, ‘I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’” – Luke 3:16 (NKJV)

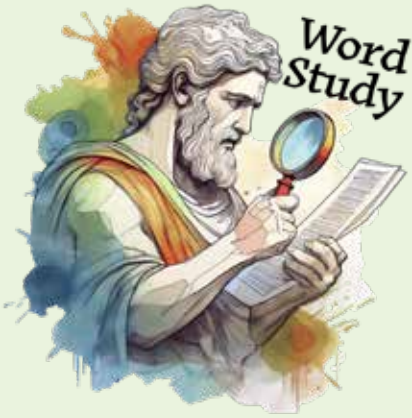
The debate surrounding Spirit baptism mainly focuses on its timing. When does it occur? Evangelicals and Pentecostals have different beliefs. Basically, evangelicals contend that all believers are baptized in the Holy Spirit at the moment they are born again. Their hearts are regenerated, and the Holy Spirit resides within them. Pentecostals, on the other hand, state that Spirit baptism happens after the new birth and water baptism. They agree that the Holy Spirit takes residence at salvation – He is a necessary agent in the new birth. However, the contention is that though He has taken residence, He hasn’t necessarily taken precedence. Spirit baptism is then that moment where the Holy Spirit takes precedence in a believer’s life. You become immersed in the Holy Spirit.

On the side of evangelicals, the passage we’re studying today is supportive. Paul doesn’t seem to leave room for the concept of a believer who hasn’t been baptized in the Spirit. But that isn’t a conclusive win. Pentecostals draw their conclusions from the testimony of the book of Acts. It seems that in many (but not all) of its testimonies of conversion, Spirit baptism is a secondary event. Salvation occurs, followed by Spirit baptism, which may occur immediately or days, weeks, or months later. The delays of Spirit baptism are often because these new believers weren’t taught about the Holy Spirit. In Acts 19, the believers in Ephesus had believed in Jesus, but they were only familiar with John’s baptism. Paul then taught them about the Holy Spirit.

“And when they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them and they began to speak in tongues and to prophesy.” Acts 19:5–6 (LEB)

Some contend that these men weren’t truly born again since they only knew of Paul’s baptism. Still, that argument doesn’t hold up well when you consider that Paul called them disciples in 19:1. Additionally, in Acts 18, Apollos also believed in the Lord Jesus and was teaching the truth about Him accurately in the synagogues. Yet, he only knew the baptism of John until Priscilla and Aquila taught him the way more accurately.

It might be that during Paul’s time, the idea of a well-taught believer who hadn’t been baptized in the Holy Spirit was unthinkable, which explains why this passage about the parts of the body doesn’t leave room



Body (12:12) [sōma (so-mah)]

Sōma occurs 120 times in the New Testament, and is translated in the ESV primarily as “body,” but also as “corpse,” “substance,” and “slave.” Sōma is used broadly to mean literally and figuratively the body or slave. It can also refer to heavenly bodies such as stars and planets, to corpses, and to the bodies of animals. It can also refer to a group of men united into one society or family.

This mutual display of honor toward one another is what guards us against division, since we all care for each other with equal passion. When we do that, verse twenty-six becomes true. If the foot is hurting or celebrating, so does the head, and vice versa. In fact, everything between the foot and the head also joins the chorus.



When a fellow believer in your church is weeping, do you mourn with them? Why or why not? If not, what is the remedy?

No One Can Do Everything

*“Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?”
– 1 Corinthians 12:29*

In the closing verses of this chapter, Paul reminded the Corinthians of both their unity and their individuality. You (plural) are the body of Christ, and individually (singular) members of it. A hand all by itself is just a hand. You are individually gifted for a purpose, but that purpose is only useful when it is connected to the rest of the body. A hand disconnected from the body isn’t just useless; it lacks life. Your gift is meant to be life-giving to the rest of the gathering. When connected, not only do you flourish, but so does everyone else.

However, with that reminder, he also pointed out that no one can do everything. It’s likely that, over the course of life, most believers will manifest multiple spiritual gifts; however, there is usually a primary gift that remains long-term. That primary gift is your “body part” in your local church. There may be times when hands need to do the job of the feet briefly. This would be similar to a momentary manifestation of a gift that isn’t your usual gift. However, just because that occurs doesn’t mean your role has changed. You might be asked to substitute teach a class and do well, but one good teaching session doesn’t mean your role should change.

With that said, how should we understand verse thirty-one?

“But strive for the greater gifts.” 1 Corinthians 12:31a (LEB)

Higher gifts have the greatest clarity. Clarity is something everyone should seek when it comes to demonstrating the Spirit’s power. Foremost, it will reveal Jesus clearly, not a person’s skill, education, or anything else about them. The clarity of a spiritual gift always magnifies Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit’s ministry is precisely that: to reveal Jesus with increasing clarity. In that way, we understand what Paul meant in 2 Corinthians 3:18 when he said that we are transformed from one degree of glory to the next by beholding the glory of the Lord. As we see Him with increasing clarity, we are transformed from one degree of glory to the next.



Regardless of your gift, have you considered how it can clearly portray the Spirit’s power? How might it make Christ clear to others?

Ongoing Discussion //

“And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.” – 1 Corinthians 12:28

Is Paul establishing a hierarchy of gifts in this verse? Would such a hierarchy be incompatible with everything he just taught about all the gifts being equally important? Or is it a timeline, where the apostles arrived first, followed by prophets and teachers, and so on? What did Paul do here?

Similar to what we've already discussed about clarity, the ESV Study Bible notes on this verse that Paul listed these gifts in order of their benefit to the church.³ So, what we have isn't a hierarchy of authority but rather an order showing which ones have the most significant impact on the church as a whole.

The discussion about which gifts are most beneficial to the church can lead to arguments. But if we understand the analogy Paul gave about the parts of the body, the argument is dead on arrival. Without teachers in the church, the Gospel can still be shared and shown in many ways, but not as clearly as a gifted teacher could explain it. It's that simple. One gift isn't better than the other, but some make the Gospel easier to understand.



Remember that we're still talking about our worship gatherings; which gifts would make the Gospel the clearest when we gather?

What You Should Know

In this passage, Paul used the analogy of the human body's parts to help us understand the importance of each spiritual gift within the Body of Christ. Everyone has a divinely given gift, and everyone is placed by God for the common good. Your personal gifts and role contribute to the overall health of your local church. Recognizing this truth should eliminate gift envy and gift snobbery. Your gifts are uniquely yours and are just as essential as your neighbor's because the Lord has arranged the members according to His plans, not ours.

- Believers are baptized into one Body by one Spirit. (12:13)
- You shouldn't view your gifts as less significant than others. (12:14-17)
- The Lord has arranged the members of the body according to His plans. (12:18)
- You should never assume some gifts aren't necessary. (12:21-25)
- The "higher" gifts are those that make the Gospel most clear. (12:28-31)

³ ESV Study Bible notes on 1 Corinthians 12:28. Taken from the ESV® Study Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), Copyright © 2008 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



Love Makes It Work {13:1-13}

Chapter twelve concludes by saying that there is a more excellent way. The discussion of spiritual gifts and how the Corinthians had started to envy each other’s gifts, or believed that some thought their gift was so excellent that others’ gifts were unnecessary, opened a wide door for Paul to write his most famous words. 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter, has become most commonly associated with weddings, and that’s a fitting use for it.

But is that all? Is that what Paul had in mind when he wrote these words? When you take the time to read the entire letter, it is sandwiched between two chapters on spiritual gifts within the section that addresses our conduct when we gather together for worship. Why is this chapter here, and what do we miss by mainly reading this at weddings?



Have you ever heard this passage read or taught in its context?

Your Gift Won't Matter

“And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” – 1 Corinthians 13:2

The Corinthians’ unloving behavior toward each other has been evident throughout this entire letter. But now that Paul had addressed the topic of spiritual gifts, it was a fitting moment to discuss love. As we saw in the

previous chapter, people’s gifts were being minimized, which perhaps contributed to the gift envy that had crept into their hearts. One of the mistakes we make in the church is judging someone’s maturity by their gifting. It was happening in Paul’s day, and it still happens.

A gifted teacher quickly captures people’s attention, and an enthusiastic preacher can certainly draw a crowd. However, those qualities don’t gauge someone’s maturity. Paul will say in the next chapter that he spoke in tongues more than anyone, but in verse one, he emphasized an enormous point. If I’m not a loving person, I’m just a noisy gong. If you’ve been a Christian long enough, you’ll see it. A teacher who can break down a text effortlessly but lacks a heart for his students’ personal lives. A pastor who can preach passionately but doesn’t spend time with his flock outside the church walls. Love is what truly makes it work. You can impress people with your gifts for a while, but eventually, showing your love and concern becomes necessary for them to keep listening.

Paul made it clear: there is no reward, in this life or the next, if you don’t love well. You can have the longest list of converts, a file full of rich teachings, and a pristine reputation for your moral excellence and giftedness, but if you don’t love well, you’ll gain nothing. Love is the essential ingredient for following Christ.

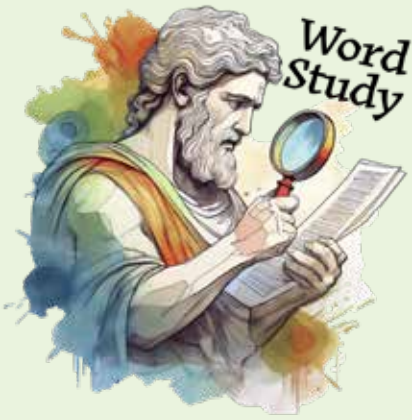


Have you ever relied on your gifts more than on how you love others? What was the outcome? Have you ever been led by someone who was gifted, but didn’t love well? What was the outcome?

Authentic Love *////////////////////*

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” – 1 Corinthians 13:7

The most helpful thing you can do right now is to forget about weddings. Paul didn’t have weddings in mind here, so we should focus on understanding his meaning. The application of this definition of love goes beyond husbands and wives. It extends into the relationships we share with one another in the body of Christ. This is basic Christian love for each other, the kind that Jesus said would identify us as His disciples. So, look at the qualifiers that Paul listed in verses 4-6.



Love (13:1) [agapē (ah-GAH-pay)]

Agapē occurs 106 times in the New Testament, and is translated in the ESV as “love,” and once as “beloved.” Agapē is one of four words that get translated as love in English. Agapē’s meaning is associated with God’s unconditional love and is the most common form of love mentioned in the New Testament. Strong’s definition includes affection, benevolence, charity, and good will.

wasn’t meant to reduce the importance of spiritual gifts, but to elevate love above them. Love must be supreme, or the gifts won’t be effective. Love must be first, or regardless of the gifts, the church will crumble.

In no uncertain terms, Paul described the Corinthians’ attitude toward spiritual gifts as childish. They were competing with each other, dismissing the value of one gift versus another, and missing the entire point. These gifts are meant to unite us, not divide us. They are temporary empowerments of the Spirit that help us grow until Christ returns and perfects everything. Fighting over them is like siblings arguing about who gets to play with dad’s tools when the real prize is spending time with dad.

Since love never ends, we should make it paramount in our gatherings. Love should be more vital in our meetings than the expression of any spiritual gift, including teaching, prophesying, or any other spoken gift. When we come together for worship, Christ’s love should permeate the atmosphere. It should season our conversations. It should temper our responses to criticism. It should soften our honest critiques. When we gather, His love should create space for and empower the expression of spiritual gifts. The reason we need the gifts is that, for now, we only know and prophesy in part. We have not yet been perfected and glorified. Until then, love should unite our gatherings and give substance to the gifts we receive so that the church will flourish and the gospel will advance.



Would you say that your church’s worship gatherings are characterized by Christ’s love? If not, what can you do to change that atmosphere?

Ongoing Discussion

*“but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.”
– 1 Corinthians 13:10*

As mentioned earlier, spiritual gifts have an expiration date. Prophecy, tongues, administration, and helps—no matter which gift you think of—there will come a time when they have fulfilled their purpose and will cease. Although it isn’t a calendar date, Paul informed us when this would happen: “when the perfect comes.”

What does that mean? Herein lies an old discussion that deserves some attention. While not every cessationist believes this way, some interpret “the perfect” as the completion of the biblical writings. If this were true, then the implication would be that spiritual gifts – particularly the ones mentioned in verse eight – would have ceased once all New Testament Scripture had been written. There are numerous problems with this interpretation of “the perfect.”

First and foremost, the most clearly present idea here is the return of Christ. Verse twelve makes it abundantly clear that Paul’s thoughts were focused on His second coming. It makes little sense for verse ten to mean something entirely different from verse twelve when they are part of the same train of thought.

Secondly, an examination of church history reveals that all spiritual gifts continued after the completion of the New Testament writings. Some cessationists argue that, instead of an immediate cessation, there was a gradual decline in the miraculous spiritual gifts. However, that argument is selective because other historical accounts show that the gifts indeed never faded.

Finally, there is ample contemporary evidence that the Holy Spirit continues to manifest all spiritual gifts to the present day. Cessationists will often discount, downplay, or outright deny the efficacy of contemporary examples, pointing to frauds, charlatans, and false miracles. There’s no doubt that those fakes have occurred, and it is well documented. However, the existence of counterfeits should not be a reason to cast shade on the genuine manifestations. Even in the first century, Paul urged the Thessalonians to “test everything.” Why bother testing if there’s no chance of fakes?

“but test everything; hold fast what is good.” – 1 Thessalonians 5:21



Intelligible Worship {14:1-25}

Chapter fourteen is loaded with things that can distract us from the main message. It is the only chapter in all of Paul's letters that goes in-depth into the proper use of tongues and prophecy during a local church worship gathering. The Corinthians had apparently become fixated on the gift of tongues. Everyone wanted to speak in tongues, and when they gathered for worship, it caused issues.

Paul's correction, by necessity, included some instruction on the nature of tongues and prophecy. But the main point he was emphasizing was about clarity. What we do when we gather must be understandable to outsiders. An unchurched person should never walk into a church service and leave confused because nothing made sense. They may not understand the Gospel – it is foolishness – but what they experience should not be confusing.



Have you ever attended a gathering where the purpose wasn't clear?

Earnestly Desire //

"Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy." – 1 Corinthians 14:1

Pursue love. It's a fitting way to start this discussion. The Corinthians had been pursuing spiritual gifts instead of love. The entire discussion of love in chapter thirteen shows that they (and we) needed correction. Don't

chase the gifts; chase love. Since the Lord gives the gifts, focus on loving one another genuinely so that the gifts He provides are used rightly.

However, immediately after that instruction, Paul said we should earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially to prophesy. That is the proper order of things. Love is primary and comes first. Pursue it. Then earnestly desire the gifts of the Spirit, particularly to prophesy. Chapter twelve concludes with the same instruction: earnestly desire. So, when we prioritize love first, our earnest desire for spiritual gifts will be couched in humility. We won't pursue gifts for our own benefit, but for the common good of the church.

It seems, then, because Paul tells us to desire them earnestly, that some spiritual gifts won't be given unless they are sought. If you're wondering how that interplays with the Lord's sovereignty, you're not alone. However, God's sovereignty and human responsibility are not mutually exclusive concepts. In Sam Storms book, *Understanding Prayer*, he answers the question, "If God is sovereign, why pray?" His answer: "Thus, prayer is how we obtain those blessings from God that God himself has foreordained to give to those who pray for them."¹ In other words, some blessings will only be given by God if we ask for them in prayer. That means they are connected to the human responsibility to ask, seek, and knock.² This idea is reflected in Paul's teaching to earnestly desire spiritual gifts.



How were you instructed regarding spiritual gifts? Were you taught, you get what you get, or were you taught to desire them earnestly?

Especially Prophesying? //

"But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you." — 1 Corinthians 14:24-25

The final two verses of this passage explain why Paul emphasized prophesying. Prophesying involves clear communication in the common language of the congregation. If prophesying is preferred for the gathered

¹ "Understanding Prayer: Biblical Foundations and Practical Guidance for Seeking God" by Sam Storms. © 2025 Zondervan. Page 70.

² Matthew 7:7-8

church, then let's consider the question: What does it mean to prophesy? It might be helpful to first clarify what it isn't.

Prophesying cannot be limited to just preaching. Some might equate preaching and prophesying, since to prophesy is to declare the works and goodness of the Lord. It is fair to say that preachers often prophesy, but not all prophesying is preaching. Why? Recall that in chapter eleven, Paul notes that it is permissible for wives to prophesy as long as they cover their heads.³ In 1 Timothy, Paul restricts the role of elder/pastor to men.⁴ Therefore, unless you believe differently and think women can serve as elders/pastors in the church, you cannot restrict prophesying to just preaching.

Prophecy is not vague. A problem with modern "prophets" is that men and women often prophesy things that cannot be tested or verified objectively. True prophecy can be tested.

*"Let two or three prophets speak, and the others evaluate."
– 1 Corinthians 14:29 (LEB)*

*"Do not despise prophecies, but examine all things; hold fast to what is good."
– 1 Thessalonians 5:20–21 (LEB)*

Prophesying does not hold the same authority as Scripture. If a prophet's words must be tested, then he is not infallible. We evaluate a person's prophesying against the Scriptures to see if it is good. This also clarifies the alleged inconsistency that Paul permits wives to prophesy, but not to teach men.⁵ Prophesying does not carry the same authority as teaching the Scriptures.

What, then, is prophesying? Paul provided a foundational definition in verse three.

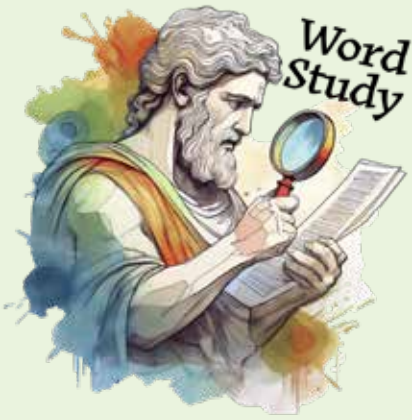
*"On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation."
– 1 Corinthians 14:3*

We shouldn't view this as a comprehensive definition, but rather as highlighting the typical role it plays within the local church: upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation. In Acts, we see that Agabus occasionally

³ 1 Corinthians 11:5

⁴ 1 Timothy 3:2, "the husband of one wife"

⁵ 1 Timothy 2:12



Desire (14:1) [zēloō (zay-LOW)]

Zēloō occurs 11 times in the New Testament, and is translated in the ESV as “jealous,” “desire,” “envy,” “feel,” “much,” “covet,” and “zealous.” Zēloō can be used in both positive and negative senses. Positively it means to have warmth of feeling, to be zealous, to desire. Negatively it means to covet, to be jealous over, or to envy. Because it has such versatility, the context of the passage will dictate the definition and usage.

prophesied the future, but since he is a lone example, we should be cautious about assuming that prophesying should frequently predict future events.⁶ It seems that if such prophesying was common during the local church’s gatherings, Paul would have included it here in his definition. It’s not excluded entirely, just not assumed as normative in the prophetic ministry of believers.

What makes upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation prophetic? You might argue that these things happen all the time at church, but no one calls them prophetic. What distinguishes run-of-the-mill encouragement from prophetic encouragement? The key lies in verse twenty-five: the secrets of the heart are disclosed. The encouragement wasn’t just a general, feel-good message. It was specific and targeted about something only the receiver would know, which is why it is described as “the secrets of the heart.”

Therefore, since prophesying is in the common language and it encourages, upbuilds, and consoles in a way that reveals the secrets of the heart, Paul says it is preferable for the worship gathering. Jesus is glorified in a way that everyone understands, and everyone will know that He is among you.



Have you ever felt led to say something to someone that didn’t possess any apparent context? If so, did you, and what was the result?

⁶ Acts 11:27; 21:10

What About Tongues?

“Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.”
– 1 Corinthians 14:5

Remember from chapter twelve that when Paul says one gift is greater, he means it has greater clarity. That is exactly the issue when Paul contrasted tongues and prophesying. In our worship gatherings, speaking in tongues can only be as great as prophesying when there’s an interpretation that translates the tongue into a common language for everyone. But before we go further into the role of tongues, let’s define terms as we did with prophesying.

The only two books in the New Testament that discuss tongues in detail are Acts and 1 Corinthians. Paul mentioned tongues in other letters, but only briefly as part of a list of spiritual gifts. The first mention of tongues is in Acts 2. When the Holy Spirit fell on the believers in the upper room, they all began to speak in other languages. These tongues were understood by the people on the street. They were hearing the mighty works of the Lord in their native languages.

“Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, ‘Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born?’” – Acts 2:7–8 (NKJV)

After this, Acts describes tongues as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit that often (but not always) occurred in believers after they were born again. Following the events of Pentecost in Acts 2, Luke (the author of Acts) does not provide any commentary on the nature of the tongues spoken, nor whether others around them understood those tongues as their native languages. For most of Acts, the gift of tongues was a manifestation of the Holy Spirit experienced by many new believers.

Outside of Acts, speaking in tongues is mentioned more in 1 Corinthians 12-14 than in all the other letters combined. And here in chapter 14, the most explanation is given about the gift outside of Acts 2. What can we learn about the nature of tongues from this chapter?

First, it is a conversation between the speaker and the Lord.

*“For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.”
– 1 Corinthians 14:2*

This is an important point. Some argue that there are two different kinds of tongues. The Acts 2 type would be known human languages, while the 1 Corinthians 14 type is unknown. The Bible never makes that distinction. A better way to describe it is that there is one gift of tongues, which allows the believer to speak in a language they don't know, whether it's a known human language or an unknown one.

Then, whether it's a known language or not, the message is between the speaker and the Lord. Notice in Acts 2 that the things said in tongues weren't directed to the people who heard but toward God, declaring His glory. They were bystanders who heard what was being said, not the ones being spoken to.

“...we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God.” – Acts 2:11

Second, without interpretation, tongues are not fruitful for the mind.

*“For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.”
– 1 Corinthians 14:14*

Some people who speak in tongues admit that initially the gift was frustrating because they sounded foolish. If you don't understand the language you're speaking, it can sound like gibberish, which can frustrate your mind. This is the main reason Paul is against the public use of tongues without an interpretation.

“Therefore, if the whole church comes together at the same time and all speak with tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?” – 1 Corinthians 14:23 (LEB)

Third, those who speak in tongues should pray for an interpretation.

*“Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret.”
– 1 Corinthians 14:13*

This needs to be discussed. In many charismatic churches, a person will speak in a tongue and then interpret that tongue. There is a built-in conflict of interest when that happens. How can the integrity of what's being said be tested when the person who spoke in tongues also provides the interpretation? Additionally, if you have both the tongue and the interpretation, why not just speak the interpretation? The goal of Paul's teaching here is for the congregation to use spiritual gifts clearly. The clearest way is to simply speak the interpretation instead of speaking in tongues. To do both is showmanship.

In short, here's Paul's teaching about speaking in tongues at church gatherings. For the sake of clarity, they should not be spoken without an interpretation. If you have both a tongue and an interpretation, just speak the interpretation. If you hear a tongue spoken out loud and receive an interpretation, you must share it. If you speak in tongues out loud but no one has the interpretation, you will be asked to refrain. Paul is not anti-tongues. He wanted everyone to speak in tongues, and he claimed to speak in tongues more than all of them. But he also believed everything spoken should be understandable.



If a lost person walked into your church's Sunday morning service, what would confuse them? Is everything as clear as it could be?

Ongoing Discussion

*“Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers.”
– 1 Corinthians 14:22*

This verse is challenging. Scholars generally agree that Paul is referring to tongues that are not interpreted, and that they serve as a sign of judgment to the unbeliever. Verse 21 references Isaiah 28:11-12, which speaks of the Lord speaking to His people with a strange tongue so that they will not listen. Speaking in uninterpreted tongues when there are lost people present is a sign of their judgment because they cannot understand the good things being said.

The ongoing problem is that many churches have removed all safeguards for speaking in tongues and encourage believers to speak in tongues freely without interpretation. How can any church be sure that

no lost people are present? And furthermore, why wouldn't you want lost people there to hear the gospel preached? So, if you want the lost to be there for the gospel, and you don't want them confused or to receive a sign of judgment, then why would you allow uninterpreted tongues to happen?

Then Paul explained that prophecy isn't for unbelievers but for believers. So, following the sign theme, if judgment on unbelievers is good news that they can't understand, the sign for believers is the blessing of being built up, encouraged, and consoled by those who prophesy with clear words. Ironically, it is through the sign for believers that unbelievers will realize that the Lord is among them. As clear prophesying occurs, the secrets of the heart are disclosed, and the unbeliever witnessing this will know that Jesus is at work.



How can you contribute to the clarity of the message in your church's worship gatherings?

What You Should Know

Every worship gathering of the local church should be understandable. Therefore, the spiritual gifts used should help clarify what is being said. Prophecy should be preferred over tongues in our gatherings unless a tongue can be interpreted. This is meant to ensure clear worship so that outsiders and unbelievers can also be blessed alongside believers. Here's what you should know.

- Pursue love and earnestly desire spiritual gifts, especially prophecy. (14:1)
- Speaking in tongues is between the believer and the Lord. (14:2)
- Prophecy is for the upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation of believers. (14:3)
- Paul is not anti-tongues, just pro-clarity. (14:5)
- For a tongue to be spoken in worship gatherings, it must be interpreted. (14:13)
- Uninterpreted tongues are a form of judgment against the lost. (14:21-22)
- Prophesying discloses the secrets of men's hearts and reveals that the Lord is in our midst. (14:25)



Something is different already. When was the last time you attended church and everyone arrived prepared to contribute to the worship? Most pastors would think they were in a parallel reality. Clearly, the situation is different. The Corinthians gathered in smaller groups across the city, making it easier for everyone to take part. If your church has grown to more than thirty people in any service, having everyone contribute becomes more challenging.

But even in Corinth, everyone contributing something was excessive. This stemmed from the gift envy we noted in chapter twelve. Everyone wanted to use their gifts for the wrong reasons. Therefore, the admonition at the end of verse twenty-six – “let all things be done for building up” – was a direct swipe at those improper motives. If everything was to be done for the building up of the church, then everything needed to be done in some kind of order so that all could benefit.

Order does not have to quench the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, Paul’s suggested order is something that will prevent quenching. All of the negative behaviors related to gifts of the Spirit do exactly that. When we use the gifts of the Spirit chaotically, instead of pleasing the Holy Spirit, we grieve Him. He desires to make Jesus Christ crystal clear to everyone present. The Corinthians were drawing more attention to themselves than anyone else.



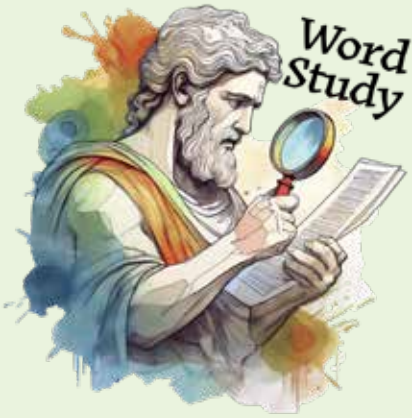
What has been your experience - too much or too little order? Have you experienced either of those extremes?

Who’s In Control?

“and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.” – 1 Corinthians 14:32–33

The phrase, “the devil made me do it,” comes to mind. While that’s clearly not what we’re dealing with, it does seem that some of the Corinthians were falling back on a similar sentiment. “I can’t help myself.” It’s a common reason given when questions are asked about speaking in tongues or prophetic utterances. That rationale is what leads to the chaos that Paul addressed here.

In these gatherings, where maybe twenty or thirty people cram into a small room in a modest home, Paul gave specific instructions. At most, three people may speak in tongues, each one at a time, and someone



Order (14:40) [*taxis* (tahk-sis)]

Taxis occurs 8 times in the New Testament, and is translated in the ESV as “order,” and “duty.” *Taxis* means regular arrangement, fixed succession, or rank in terms of civic affairs. It appears once in the gospels as “duty” in Luke 1:8, and the rest appear in Paul’s letters and the book of Hebrews. Paul uses it regarding the church’s good order, and the author of Hebrews uses it in reference to the priestly order of Melchizedek.

prophetic messages, but once that time was over, they should remain silent and speak with their husbands at home if they had questions or comments.

Some try to argue against Paul’s prohibition using a cultural argument. They claim it wasn’t culturally acceptable for women to be so vocal, so they should remain silent. However, the cultural argument doesn’t stand up because Paul made his appeal to the Law.

“Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says.”

– 1 Corinthians 14:34 (NKJV)

The next objection would be if we are no longer under the law, but under grace, why does this even matter? The matter of being under the law versus under grace is a false flag. Yes, we are under grace, but as new creations, the law of the Lord will find fulfillment in us as Christ lives through us. If Paul taught that because of the law, women should not disrupt the gathering and remain silent, then as believers, that aspect of the law will be expressed in us as Christ lives through us.

But let’s be fair. Because the Lord prescribes order, men who disrupt the gathering are equally wrong. No one should be a disruptive influence in our worship. A spirit of disruption comes from chaos. Those who practice chaos are not filled with the Spirit, and possibly may not even be born again.

However, even with all his exhortations to keep things in order, Paul understood the tendency to throw the baby out with the bathwater. In our efforts to be organized, we should not prohibit tongues and prophecy. Earnestly desire to prophesy, do not forbid tongues, and keep everything in proper order. To some, that may



Resurrection

"Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,"

"For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed."

"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."

*"Death is swallowed up in victory.
O death, where is your victory?
O death, where is your sting?"*

"What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power."

This is our final unit, and chapter fifteen marks the beginning of the end of Paul's letter. After offering corrections regarding their gathered worship, Paul addressed questions and concerns about the Gospel and its promise of resurrection. Although the precise nature of the Corinthians' issues surrounding the resurrection is unclear, if they are like the Thessalonian church, they may have questioned whether the resurrection of the dead had already occurred or whether it was even promised at all.

Here's a preview of what's ahead.

- The resurrection of Christ is central to the Gospel message.
- Christ's resurrection is the promise of our future resurrection.
- If Christ was not raised, then we remain in our sins.
- Death came by Adam, resurrection comes by Christ.
- All things will be subjected to Christ before "the end".
- Our resurrection bodies will be raised in glory, power, and spirit.
- Our resurrection bodies will be incorruptible and bear the image of Christ.
- Death has been swallowed up in victory through Christ.



Do you often think of your future resurrection?



The Gospel is Central {15:1-11}

The opening line of chapter fifteen echoes chapter two, when Paul said he decided to know nothing among them except Christ crucified. Here we get a glimpse of that preaching, the simple gospel that he proclaimed.

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,” – 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

After covering so many matters in this letter, Paul returned to the central message that gives every local church its rallying cry. This is the central theme of the gathered church. Our preaching should center on this. Our worship should center on this. Our good works in the community should center on this. There is nothing a local church does that shouldn't have the Gospel as its central, defining purpose.



In what ways can a church stray from the centrality of the Gospel?

In Accordance with Scripture //

One of the interesting points Paul makes in this passage is that Christ's death, burial, and resurrection were in accordance with the Scriptures. It's not surprising that Paul rooted his Gospel teachings in the Scriptures,

but the question arises: which Scriptures? At the time, the New Testament as we know it didn't exist. When Paul referred to the Scriptures, he was almost always referring to the Old Testament.

This highlights an important point. Christians should know both the Old and New Testaments. Since the authors of the New Testament drew their knowledge and understanding of Christ from the Holy Spirit's illumination of the Old Testament, why do today's Christians shortchange themselves by neglecting it? As well as we teach the New, we should be able to teach the Old. Of course, we understand the Old Testament through the incarnation, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, which Old Testament passages did Paul have in mind? Here are a few possibilities.

- Psalm 16:8-11
- Psalm 22
- Psalm 110:1
- Isaiah 53:1-12
- Hosea 6:2

These verses aren't alone. While the exact number isn't universally agreed upon, there are over three hundred Old Testament verses that can be directly tied to Jesus Christ. So, when Paul said, "in accordance with the Scriptures," he referred to a host of Old Testament passages that gave credence to the testimony of Jesus.

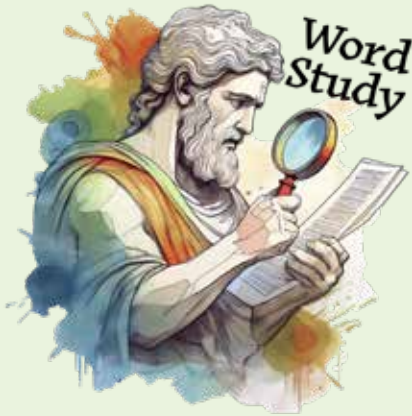


Do you struggle reading the Old Testament? If you do, why? What steps can you take to improve your understanding of the Old Testament?

There Were Witnesses //

"Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep." – 1 Corinthians 15:6

Witnesses lend credibility to claims. If you were accused of a crime you did not commit, having one or more witnesses who can confirm you were elsewhere at the time and place of the crime would be beneficial. It's your alibi. While resurrection is not a crime, it is a claim that demands witnesses to be believed. Paul listed



Preached (15:1)

[*euaggelizō* (eh-van-geh-LEE-zo)]

Euaggelizō occurs 51 times in the New Testament, and is translated in the ESV as “good news,” “preach,” “proclaim,” “announced,” and “gospel.” *Euaggelizō* means to announce good news. It is often used in the announcement of good tidings, but its particular New Testament usage has to do with the preaching of the Gospel. It isn’t the good news itself, but the action of proclaiming good news.

However, he could not deny his calling. His witness to the risen Jesus arrested his heart and changed his life, and Jesus set him apart for special use. Paul likely resonated deeply with his statements to the Corinthians in chapter one, where he reminded them of their lowly beginnings. Not many of them were wise or of noble birth. None of them was a murderer. Paul’s regret is never far from the surface. But despite everything, by the Lord’s immeasurable grace, he was who he was. He took no credit and gave all glory to Jesus. The power of his witness was innately tied to who he was before Jesus called him.

The Gospel leaves no room for someone who remains the same. The centrality of the Gospel in a local church is evident in the presence of believers undergoing transformation. The centrality of the Gospel in a local church is evident in the manifestation of spiritual gifts in believers. Many people look at Corinth and say this is what happens when you lose focus on the Gospel. Yes, but don’t create a false dichotomy. Don’t lose sight of the Spirit’s power. The Gospel comes preloaded with Holy Spirit power that simply happens when we keep Christ in the center. The Gospel makes us all effective witnesses because that power is presently changing us and manifesting through us to build one another up in our faith.



Are you more like Jesus today than ever before? Why or why not?

Ongoing Discussion *////////////////////////////////////*

“that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,” – 1 Corinthians 15:4

This entire chapter focuses on the resurrection, so in his reminder about the Gospel, Paul gave particular emphasis to Jesus’ resurrection. But it’s not undue emphasis. We will learn in the next passage that if there is no resurrection of Christ, our faith is useless. That means even if Jesus lived a perfect life and died on the cross, without resurrection, it was an empty sacrifice. Rightly, the church sings so much about the cross, but we should sing even more about an empty tomb.

We can do both with gratitude, but in some places the trend is to emphasize the cross every week and the empty tomb on Easter. We become a downcast, navel-gazing lot if all we ever do is consider Christ’s death. True, our sin made Jesus’ death on the cross necessary, and that should weigh heavily on us. But He didn’t stay dead! He rose from the dead on the third day and lives forevermore! That latter reality is one of hope and promise.

The church is glad because of the resurrection and the promise of our future resurrection. Because of this hope, the church should be a joy-filled, hopeful, glad-hearted family. We’re inheriting a future we couldn’t earn and don’t deserve. It’s all because Jesus rose from the dead. Resurrection is the promise of the Gospel.



Have you been more cross-focused or empty-tomb-focused?

What You Should Know *////////////////////////////////////*

In this final portion of the letter, Paul went back to the beginning. He returned to the simple Gospel. He reminded them that this is of first importance. The Gospel must remain central in the life of every church. Its power makes us witnesses to the risen Jesus, as it is no longer we who live, but Christ living in us. Our witness has power because the Gospel makes us into new people. Who we are in Christ is because of the Lord’s grace alone. Here’s what you should know.



Our Promised Resurrection{15:12-34}

Paul’s emphasis on the resurrection throughout this chapter suggests that some in Corinth were doubting or denying it. In fact, his statement in verse thirty-three seems to be a direct response to that problem. Don’t tolerate those who deny the resurrection, because their influence will corrupt the church.

There were likely eloquent heretics among the Corinthians who argued against the resurrection. As noted at the beginning of this letter, the Corinthians valued eloquence, so these heretics were able to attract listeners. Reconstructing the scenario from Paul’s response, it seems they embraced Christ’s resurrection, but denied the promise of our resurrection. In this passage, Paul examines the implications of these heretical claims, explains why they are wrong, and offers practical arguments for the resurrection.



How have you been taught to understand Christ's resurrection and its relationship to the resurrection of the dead?

What If?

“But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.” – 1 Corinthians 15:13-14

The way Paul began this segment of his defense is noteworthy. His belief in Christ’s resurrection rests on a pre-existing belief. In other words, Paul believed in the resurrection of the dead before he believed in Christ.

Look at how he structured his statement: “But if there is no resurrection of the dead,” – the pre-existing belief – “then not even Christ has been raised,” – the belief built on the pre-existing one.

The belief in the resurrection of the dead predates Christ’s birth by many centuries. The Old Testament contains several references, the earliest of which is attributed to the book of Job.

“But I myself know that my redeemer is alive, and at the last he will stand up upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, but from my flesh I will see God,” – Job 19:25–26 (LEB)

Job’s belief was that after his death and his body was destroyed, he would once again see the Lord in his flesh. While this is a somewhat veiled reference to resurrection, it’s notable that what is believed to be the oldest book in the Bible contains this belief. The next clearest references to resurrection come from the Psalms.

“for you will not abandon my soul to Sheol; you will not give your faithful one to see the grave.” – Psalm 16:10 (LEB)

“Surely God will ransom my life from the power of Sheol, because he will receive me. Selah” – Psalm 49:15 (LEB)

However, the most unambiguous references to the resurrection of the dead in the Old Testament come from the Prophets.

“Your dead shall live; their corpses shall rise. Wake up and sing for joy, dwellers of the dust, for your dew is celestial dew, and the earth will give birth to dead spirits.” – Isaiah 26:19 (LEB)

“And many from those sleeping in the dusty ground will awake, some to everlasting life and some to disgrace and everlasting contempt.” – Daniel 12:2 (LEB)

Paul viewed Christ’s resurrection as the first evidence of the Old Testament’s promises of resurrection. In verse twenty, he called Christ the “firstfruits” of those who have fallen asleep. So, Paul’s argument against

those who don't believe in the resurrection of the dead rightly points out that if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ did not rise from the dead.

Consequently, Paul rightly pointed out that if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ did not rise from the dead, everyone who has died in Christ has perished, and those who are still living in Christ are fools, misrepresenting the Lord, and are to be pitied more than anyone else.



What hopes do we gain from our belief in the resurrection of the dead?

The First to Rise *////////////////////////////////////*

“For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.” – 1 Corinthians 15:21

In verse twenty, Paul's confidence in Christ's resurrection is tied directly to how he opened this stream of thought. There were over five hundred witnesses to Him after His resurrection. His resurrection remained highly attested by eyewitnesses. He is risen! Therefore, because He is risen, those who belong to Him will also rise as He did. His resurrection, then, becomes the prototype of what we who believe will receive at His coming.

Paul's logical argument parallels what he taught in Romans chapter five.

“For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.” – Romans 5:17 (NKJV)

Whoever is found in Adam will inherit what he has to offer – death. Whoever is found in Christ will inherit what He has to offer – life. Hence, the resurrection of the body is part of the inheritance we receive from Jesus.

Concerning our future resurrection, what will we inherit? Paul hints at the answer in Romans 8.

bodily resurrection of dead believers will occur just prior to or simultaneously with His return. “How much prior?” is the source of much discussion.

But the order of things isn’t just a matter of chronology. Paul broached a subject here that sparked significant controversy in the early church. Verse twenty-eight states that once all His enemies are defeated, the Son will subject Himself to the Father so that God may be all in all. This led to great debate over whether the Son is equal to the Father if He subjects Himself in this way. However, the matter is resolved easily if you understand the distinction between role and relationship.

Christ’s role in redemption is indeed subordinate to the Father’s, but His relationship to the Father is not. In other words, the plan to redeem all things requires each member of the Godhead to assume roles within a hierarchy. Yet in their relationship with one another, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are completely equal in all things. They willingly assumed this hierarchy of roles to accomplish the one thing they all wanted: the redemption of all things.



How does the order of things give us a better understanding of the Lord’s character?

Ongoing Discussion

*“Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?”
– 1 Corinthians 15:29*

This verse has confounded scholars. There are currently at least forty distinct interpretations of this verse.¹ What seems consistently agreed upon is that Paul wasn’t condoning this practice but was instead using it to bolster his argument. The statement seems to plainly indicate that at least some in Corinth were practicing baptism for the dead. This could mean one of two things. It was either a washing of the dead bodies of believers prior to their burial or a proxy baptism of believing family members on behalf of the one who died. There is insufficient evidence either way to tell us which is true.

¹ Brown, D. R., & Twist, E. T. (2013). 1 Corinthians (J. D. Barry & D. Mangum, Eds.; 1 Co 15:29). Lexham Press.



What Will We Become? {15:35-58}

One of the most infamous things that professing Christians say, or at least do little to correct, is this: God needed another angel. Grandma gained her wings. This is patently untrue on both counts, yet the idea that when a believer dies they gain wings or become like the angels persists. Yet even a surface reading of Scripture refutes this notion. The cartoon Tom and Jerry has a tighter grip on our minds than the Scriptures do on this subject.

But even those who understand and reject this idea either describe the eternal state in nonphysical terms or tie it too closely to our current earthly experience. This life is a shadow of the one to come, so there are similarities, but the shadow is meant only to show the shape of reality, not the substance.



As a believer, how have you been taught to think about life after Christ's return?

Our Only Preview

“But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” – 1 Corinthians 15:35

Though Paul’s initial response to this question seems incredulous, it’s a fair question for inquiring minds. Even those who rightly understand this subject ask this question. What follows is Paul’s most detailed teaching on the resurrection body. But we also have a preview in the Gospels. The body that Christ possessed after His resurrection is our only real glimpse into what may await every believer. However, even with this glorious

sneak-peek, we must temper our expectations. Because our only example is the risen Son of God, it remains unclear precisely how identical our bodies will be to His. Will our bodies be one hundred percent just like His, or will they be very similar, but beneath His by some magnitude? The Bible doesn't make it that clear.

However, with that caveat in mind, let's look at Christ, post-resurrection, and take notes.

- Jesus' new body was the same yet transformed. The tomb was empty. (John 20:6-7)
- Jesus was recognizable, yet different enough that He wasn't immediately recognized on a few occasions. On one occasion, He purposefully concealed His identity, and on another, He seemed different enough to remain unrecognized. (Luke 24:16; John 20:14)
- Jesus' new body was physical. He invited the disciples to touch Him and ate a meal with some of them. (Luke 24:39, 42-43; John 20:27)
- Jesus could appear and vanish at will. He once appeared to the disciples behind locked doors and, on another occasion, vanished before their eyes. (John 20:19; Luke 24:31)
- Jesus' new body retained the scars of His crucifixion. It's unclear whether that means every resurrection body will retain scars from this life or if it was a one-off to remind us of His sacrifice for us. (John 20:20, 27)

Christ's resurrected body is the template for what we can expect. Even though the Gospel authors didn't bother to expound on the nature and abilities of His new body, what they witnessed gives us enough clues to stir our imaginations.



In 1 John 3:2, we are told that when we see Him, we shall be like Him. Have you given much thought to what that means physically? What are the implications of this truth for life after His coming?

Heavenly vs. Earthly *////////////////////////////////////*

*“There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another.”
— 1 Corinthians 15:40*

Paul drew a contrast between who we are now and who we will become. Right now, we are encumbered by corruptible flesh. What does that mean? Simply put, it means that the effects of sin have ruined our physical

bodies. This doesn't mean that people die because of particular sins (though it certainly can happen, as sinful choices can lead to physical death). Rather, in a broader sense, the sin nature corrupts the physical body. This is what the Lord meant when He told Adam, "You shall surely die," if you eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.¹ It wasn't an immediate physical death, but death did eventually come as a result of the corrupting effects of sin on the body.

"Thus also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruptibility" – 1 Corinthians 15:42 (LEB)

Though He was misunderstood, Jesus predicted His death and resurrection several times. One of those predictions was wrapped in a seed metaphor that fits this passage well.

*"Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit."
– John 12:24 (LEB)*

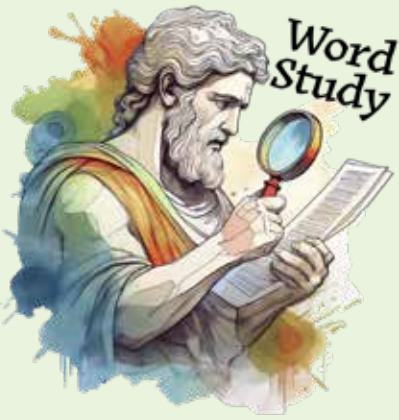
Even as the Son of God, Jesus was clothed in human flesh in His incarnation. This is one of the mysteries of His life on earth. He was both entirely human and divine at once. Anything less wouldn't do. In His humanity, He bore corruptible flesh, which meant He could be tempted by sin, yet He also remained completely divine, which gave Him the power to resist all temptations. To His (and our) point, when the corruptible flesh – the grain of wheat – falls into the earth and dies, it bears much fruit – it resurrects to its intended existence.

Paul's contrasts include perishable to imperishable, dishonor to glory, weakness to power, and natural to spiritual. The difference between the earthly and heavenly bodies is hard to envision when our only frame of reference is the earthly. Though it's easy to let our imaginations run away, we can ground our understanding in a single necessity. The most important reason for this change is to enable us to exist eternally with the Father in a face-to-face relationship.



How does the promise of this future reality affect your life in the here and now?

¹ Genesis 2:16



Imperishable (15:42)

[*aptharsia* (af-thar-SEE-ah)]

Aptharsia occurs 7 times in the New Testament, and is translated in the ESV as “imperishable,” “incorruptible,” and “immortality.” Aptharsia means immortality, incorruption, sincerity, unending existence, and perpetuity. This word is used almost exclusively in context with the promised future existence of all believers. Paul’s use in 1 Corinthians is connected with the durability of our resurrected bodies, recreated to last for eternal ages in the Lord’s presence.

As He Is, So Are We //

“As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven.”
— 1 Corinthians 15:48

Paul called Jesus the last Adam. The first Adam became a living being. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. The contrast isn’t meant to spark a discussion of what Paul meant by “life-giving spirit.” It’s a contrast of origin. Adam came from the dust. Christ came from heaven. Adam brought death. Christ brings life.

In all of this, Paul understood that Adam was a type of Christ.² He foreshadowed Jesus in that He was the head of the human race, and every human inherited what He offered. Therefore, just as we inherited dust and death from Adam, in Christ we inherit spirit and life! Not just the life we have known, but eternal life and everything necessary to live eternally with Him. That means we receive incorruptible, spiritual bodies at our resurrection, just as He did.

This passage stands alongside Romans chapter eight as one of the most glorious in Paul’s writings. There’s no correction, only promises. No admonition, just encouragement. Why don’t we spend more time contemplating this glorious future? Without real-life frames of reference, finding practical encouragement in such a surreal passage can be tricky. We would do well to familiarize ourselves with these glorious promises, because there have been times, there are times, and there will be times when those promises help us endure terrible hardships.

² Romans 5:14



How has the promise of our resurrection into new bodies helped you endure hardships?

Ongoing Discussion *////////////////////*

“Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.” – 1 Corinthians 15:51–52

Within Christian circles, there is much discussion about whether the rapture is real. The subject suffers from bad labeling. Some who say there is no rapture are rejecting the broader argument for a premillennial, dispensational (pre-tribulation) understanding of the end times. This view holds that these verses are fulfilled seven years before Christ’s second coming, known as the rapture. Its critics sometimes respond by denying the rapture. However, those critics would still affirm this passage.

The problem lies in the word choice. The word rapture comes from the Latin “rapiō,” a translation of the Greek “harpazō.” These words mean, “to snatch away.” It appears in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, where Paul speaks of what happens to those in Christ who are alive at His coming.

*“Then we who are alive, who remain, will be snatched away at the same time together with them in the clouds for a meeting with the Lord in the air, and thus we will be together with the Lord always.”
– 1 Thessalonians 4:17 (LEB)*

The critics who say there is no rapture have committed the error of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. When Christ returns, regardless of which understanding of end-times theology you embrace, the dead in Christ will be resurrected, imperishable. Then, those believers who are alive at that moment will be “snatched away.” Why? They, too, must receive the promise of their resurrection bodies, but since they have not yet died,



Final Instructions {16:1-24}

This is the final chapter. Throughout this letter, Paul’s love and concern for the Corinthian church were evident. He invested eighteen months in planting their church, training their leaders, and laying the foundation of Christ crucified and resurrected. His investment in them ran deep. The friendships formed were heartfelt. At the end, Paul wraps up this letter with a few final instructions, travel plans, and his personal closing.



As a whole, how has this letter changed your lived-out faith, particularly in the life of your local church?

The Collection

“On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.” – 1 Corinthians 16:2

There are a few things we can gather from this. Apparently, there were questions about the collection, which he instructed them to take. Verse three says this collection is going to Jerusalem. In Romans, Paul indicated that this collection (among others) was for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.

“But now I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints. For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem.” – Romans 15:25–26 (NKJV)

First, it is clear that Paul instilled in the churches he planted a heart for helping others beyond their borders. Not only should each local church care for its own people, but it should also make provisions for people elsewhere. This is analogous to setting aside a portion of each week's offerings to support missionaries around the world.

Second, Paul unintentionally revealed that the Corinthian church gathered for worship on Sunday. It's unclear when or how quickly this transition occurred, but the day the church gathered organically shifted from Saturday to Sunday. Since this letter is believed to have been written in the mid-50s AD, we can deduce that the shift happened within twenty years of the church's birth in Acts 2.

Finally, this instruction indicates that taking up offerings during the worship gathering was a common practice from the beginning. Despite all the grumbling that occurs when churches dare to speak about money, the collection is not a novel development. The church has always taken up collections to serve the body of Christ, both locally and globally. As this instruction implies, people have always questioned what happens to the money given. Paul took great care with the offerings, ensuring that trusted men would handle them. So should every church. Make sure the ones who handle your church's offerings are trustworthy.



Why is it important for local churches to maintain a focus on both local and global missions?

Travel Plans

*"I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go."
- 1 Corinthians 16:5-6*

While it's easy to skim over these verses as impractical because, on the surface, they don't contain any instruction, they do offer helpful context. Here, in verse eight, we learn that Paul was in Ephesus when he wrote this letter. He planned to revisit them after passing through Macedonia and, Lord willing, spend the winter with them. His desire to spend significant time with them revealed his love.

We also have an indication that Timothy may have delivered this letter. You can track these events in Acts chapter 19.

“When these things were accomplished, Paul purposed in the Spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, “After I have been there, I must also see Rome.” So he sent into Macedonia two of those who ministered to him, Timothy and Erastus, but he himself stayed in Asia for a time.” – Acts 19:21–22 (NKJV)

Recall that Timothy was also mentioned earlier in this letter.

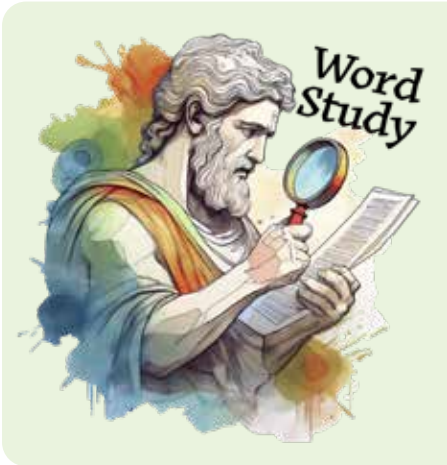
“That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.” – 1 Corinthians 4:17

Details like these knit the entire narrative together. What happened in Acts shows up in Paul’s letters. Our understanding of Scripture must mature beyond reading the letters as isolated teachings. They are part of the greater story.

Consequently, our study of Scripture is about connection. Connecting the smaller stories to the larger story fosters connection with the Author of all our stories. When we take care to follow the timeline, connect the dots, and let the grand saga of the Lord’s redemptive work in creation shape how our small contribution to that story unfolds, Jesus receives all the glory. Once you see what He’s done and what He’s doing, you realize it’s a gift of His grace that He included you. Like Paul’s travel plans, your plans become part of the story that will be retold for the eternal ages to come.



Looking back, how might finding the letter’s place in the larger story help you connect the dots? Why is it important to do so?



Lord Come (16:22) [*marana tha* (ma-RA-na tha)]

Marana tha occurs once in the New Testament, in 1 Corinthians 16:22, and is translated in the ESV as “Lord, come.” Marana tha is an Aramaic sentence, which can be translated as “Lord come” or “our Lord has come.” Since it occurs only once, it is difficult to translate it with certainty. When it appears in later Christian writings, it seems to be based upon Paul’s usage here in 1 Corinthians.

One Last Thing

“Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.” – 1 Corinthians 16:13–14

Verses twelve through seventeen were brief, final reminders for the church in Corinth. In verse twelve, Paul reminded them that he was sending Apollos and would come at his first opportunity. This was important to remind the church that he and Apollos were working together. It was perhaps a final appeal that no divisions form around them.

The rapid-fire admonishments in verses thirteen and fourteen are given without explanation. If the church took everything in this letter to heart, these statements should be self-explanatory. In particular, “act like men” and do everything “in love” stand out. The common trope of rugged individualism among American men isn’t always associated with doing all things in love. According to Paul, acting like men and doing all things in love are meant to be synonymous.

The final admonition is that the church should submit to those who faithfully serve. He noted that Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus were faithful laborers and deserved recognition. In some church circles, honoring one another has fallen on hard times. In efforts to be humble and shun pride, we have forgotten how to give proper honor and recognition when it is due. It’s not prideful to receive honor when it is due. Nor is it robbing glory from the Lord to say “thank you” to someone who shows respect. Of course, one must guard one’s heart, but constantly deflecting and refusing to receive honor robs others of the blessing of giving it.



Where do you find your heart as we read these final admonitions? Has this letter brought to light what needed to change? Have you made those changes?

Ongoing Discussion

“I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.” – 1 Corinthians 16:21

Paul personally writes his greeting in a few of his letters. Galatians, 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, and Colossians all end with Paul noting that he has written the greeting himself. This indicates that Paul dictated the body of his letters. To whom? Likely to Sosthenes, who is mentioned in the opening verse.

“Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother,” – 1 Corinthians 1:1 (NKJV)

Paul took the pen from Sosthenes to show that he was indeed the author of the letter. Some say Paul did this to authenticate his letters, but there is no scholarly consensus on a definitive reason. At least, it seems he took pleasure in doing so in some of his letters.

But the fact that Paul likely had a scribe to whom he dictated his letters raises another question. What exactly went into letter writing in the first century? It’s not as if everyone had paper and pens lying around as we do. And if the claims that Paul had poor eyesight are true (based on Galatians 6:11), even if he had a supply of paper and pens, he wouldn’t be able to compose entire letters efficiently.

As it turns out, composing these letters came at a great personal cost to Paul. According to research by Randolph Richards, the cost of letters like Romans and 1 Corinthians would’ve been around \$3,100 in today’s money.¹ When you consider the high cost of scribes, pens, and paper, the Scriptures become even more precious to us. Paul, a man who was beaten, shipwrecked, stoned, left for dead, persecuted, constantly ridiculed, and often opposed by factions within the churches he planted, also worked as a tent maker so he

¹ Cited from The Bible Project Podcast, episode, “Pen, Parchment, and People,” New Testament Letters, Episode 8. <https://bibleproject.com/podcasts/pen-parchment-and-people/>
