

*1 Corinthians*

## PREFACE

It is fair to say that the first letter to the Corinthians would make a pretty good handbook for living as a follower of Christ. It is filled with solid, practical counsel on such matters as family life, morality, church-family life, decorum in the worship service, the use of Spirit-gifts, the supremacy of love in all things, and much more. It has taken us a little more than four years to digest this letter—not because I am a slow-poke, but that there is so much here for us to learn and add to our lives. There is so much meat to this letter that we haven't the time to reprise every bit of that Spirit-led counsel, but I have gleaned what I consider the most important for us to take away from this profound letter.

This letter to the Corinthians is where our love for Christ meets our love for each other. The two are inexorably entwined. We can't be too sure about the Corinthian's love for Christ: Paul refers to them as "saints" (v1:2), but he also closes the letter by stating, "if anyone does not love the lord, he is to be accursed." But we *are* given plenty of evidence that they struggled in their relationships with each other. Paul makes it clear that the two must flow together: our *horizontal* life reflects the quality of our relationship with the Lord, and that *vertical* relationship reflects how well we live with others.

Please turn to [Chapter One](#).

## WISDOM

Compared to the first century, it is unquestionably more critical today that we be discerning about the source of our knowledge and wisdom, for since the time of Paul, the options have expanded exponentially. So what was true for them is even more true for us.

Early on we learned that the Corinthians had a bad habit of listening to the "wisdom" of the wrong people. That Greco-Roman society prided itself on its deep, philosophical insight; the problem for the Corinth church was that, from a Christian worldview, that insight was all wrong. Why? v25: "Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." This world's wisdom—no matter how high and profound—cannot hold a candle to *God's* wisdom.

**v21: Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?**

The Christian has a source for wisdom that this world does not possess, or even understand. It may have *access* to our primary source—the written word of God—but it lacks the key to unlock that eternal book: the Holy Spirit.

## Read 1 Corinthians 2:12-14.

Given our exalted, holy source-set for wisdom, why do we waste so much time and resources listening to the false prophets of this fallen world, even as we neglect God's word?

### THE SPIRIT AND HIS GIFTS

The Holy Spirit plays an important role in this letter. As Chapter Two flows into Three, Paul laments that he is forced to consider them and address them—believers though they are—as “men of flesh.”

## Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-3.

That is, they were not growing, maturing in the things of God and His Christ because they were too focused on the things of this world. They were spiritually stunted, even as they vaunted their “wisdom” and sophistication. Yet, back in the opening of this letter, he affirmed that they were “not lacking in any gift”—that is, Spirit-gifts. Why, then, the problem? *Where* is the problem? Why does the apostle commit *three chapters* of this letter (12-14) to Spirit-gifts and their use? Because, as we saw in virtually every part of their lives, the Corinthians had the tools at hand, but were using them badly.

Just as God made the point to Samuel about His selection of King David (1 Samuel 16:7), He doesn't care what we look like, how much knowledge we have, how much money we have; God cares about the condition of our heart, and that it be aligned with His. This was the Corinthian's Achilles heel: they may have *had* the Spirit, but they were not listening to Him, much less permitting His counsel to dominate their lives. Consequently they were of little use as a witness to the world around them—indeed, the evidence shows that in that regard they were of more use to the enemy, than to the gospel of Christ.

Please turn to Chapter Twelve.

Without the Holy Spirit, the “Christian” is not a Christian, and without the gift(s) that He brings to the believer, the Christian would be impotent in his calling (v12:3). The church is populated by believers with an unbounded variety of gifts (v12:5). God believes in hierarchy; he uses it in the administration of the church and in the family. According to Paul, however, God does *not* believe in a hierarchy—a “pecking order”—regarding the apportioning of Spirit-gifts.

## Read 1 Corinthians 12:14-17.

No one gift is any more important than the others; *all* are useful in the body of Christ. And even if there *were* a hierarchy of gifts, it would say nothing of the holder of that gift, for all have been assigned by God: “But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired” (v12:18).

**It is an earthy, flesh-bound affectation that says the one who cleans the toilets or repairs the lighting is less important than the elder or pastor. The gift itself is not God’s measure, but obedience to one’s calling.**

## LOVE

Regarding Spirit-gifts, their use in Christ’s body, the church, is to be energized by, inspired by, colored by, and enveloped in *love*. This is so important to the apostle that he interrupts his treatise on Spirit-gifts to emphasize this in the whole of Chapter Thirteen (concluding in v14:1). But he had earlier made the same point in his lengthy discussion “concerning things sacrificed to idols.”

### Read 1 Corinthians 8:1.

And he exemplifies this by his statement that closes the chapter: “Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.” That is how love (*agape*) is to be worked out in the body of Christ—on a sacrificial level.

**We dare not claim a “right” when the exercise of that right will harm a brother or sister in Christ. It is a beautiful picture of true *agape* to forego a right to the benefit of someone else.**

Let all that you do be done in love. (v16:14)

## FAMILY LIFE IN THE CHURCH

Love comes into play as well, although not by that word, when Paul takes the Corinthians to task over their behavior at the Lord’s Supper and the associate communal meal.

### Read 1 Corinthians 11:20-22.

Most everyone who has grown up in, or regularly attends an evangelical church, is familiar with the commonly recited litany from Chapter Eleven. But it is surely a small subset of that group that realizes the context from which those verses are lifted. It would seem that some in the Corinth church—from all accounts the wealthy elite—had turned what is to be a holy and reverent remembrance into a drunken Bacchanal! Combined with the communal meal common in that culture, the Lord’s Supper had become something of a riotous banquet, in which those of lower stations were receiving only the leftover crumbs.

In the midst of his criticism of their shabby behavior Paul inserts, like a beam of sunlight piercing through dark storm clouds, a recitation of how the Lord intended His supper to be conducted in vv23-26. In a few churches the verses that follow will be read, those instructing those in attendance to “examine” themselves.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 11:27-29.**

Traditionally these verses have been used to encourage an evaluation of the individual’s conscience and behavior (“any unconfessed sins”) before taking the bread and the wine. While that is certainly a worthwhile and righteous prelude to the Supper, my understanding of this passage *within the context of Chapter Eleven* is that it pertains more to an evaluation of our behavior in and around the body of Christ, examining the health of our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Are we treating them as we should? Are we treating them with the respect and consideration due? Do we love them as we should? This is where, it is clear from Chapter Eleven and elsewhere, some in the Corinth church were failing.

**Christ Jesus said that we are to approach and participate in the Lord’s Supper—Communion—“in remembrance of” Him; we are to remember the sacrifice He made on our behalf on the cross, to remember with reverent thanksgiving everything else He has and is doing for us. We are also to think of it as a time to reestablish and affirm our family ties with each other as we gather around the communal table.**

### **WORSHIP**

Related to what he says about our responsibilities in the Lord’s Supper, also in Chapter Eleven (vv2-16) Paul speaks of our responsibilities to each other in corporate worship—of which the Supper is a part. It is easy to get lost in the details of the God-ordained hierarchical structure of the sexes, the details of “head coverings” for men and women, the restrictions for men and women regarding their hair—all combined with the commands from Chapter Fourteen about the use of prophecy and tongues in the assembly, including the command that “women are to keep silent in the churches” (14:34). But wrap it all up, stand back from it and squint, and we see that it all falls under the heading of believers’ comportment in corporate worship.

How we present and adorn ourselves for worship, what we say or do not say in worship, how we behave during worship and the Lord’s Supper—all are connected directly, simultaneously in two directions: upward to God, and outward to our brothers and sisters in Christ. That is, how we think and feel about our God, and how we think and feel about our church family. It is clear throughout this letter that the apostle Paul believes that *both* are critically important.

Is there anything about our appearance that could distract another from their worship of our God? Are we saying or doing anything that draws attention away from Him and onto us? Are we showing due honor and respect to our corporate Head, Christ Jesus, as well as our familial head? Are our mind and heart focused on things above, or on the things of this world?

I would suggest that this may be our most important takeaway from this letter. The Corinth church was permitting too much of the secular, fallen culture to permeate the local body of Christ. The habits and philosophies of non-believers were corrupting almost every aspect of believers' lives, and the name of Christ was being sullied as a result—not to mention the growth, maturing, and witness of the church.

No other letter in the canon so clearly speaks to us today; no other letter so definitively reflects our situation today. So we are left with one final challenge:

**Are we, both as a church and as individuals, willing to stand on God's word, resolute and firm, when faced against the fierce winds and slippery standards of a fallen culture? Will we unashamedly stand for the name of Jesus the Christ, when this world demands our compromise? It is my prayer that, by God's grace, our answer will be, "Yes, we will."**