

46_Bible_Arguments_1_Corinthians

INTRODUCTION TO 1 CORINTHIANS

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City of Corinth

The city of Corinth was strategically located in the center of Greece on the main trade route between East and West and North and South. The ancient city was destroyed in 146 B.C. by Mummius but rebuilt as a Roman colony exactly one hundred years later. A very cosmopolitan city, it rapidly grew into the commercial and political capital of Achaia and, in size, wealth and commerce, the most important city in Greece. (See my Th.M. thesis on "Christian Liberty in the Corinthian Epistles," Dallas Theological Seminary, 1969.) The transient population of this middle class city was drawn from many lands and united in giving vent to their passions. Thus, the wealthy city became a center of evil and sensuality stimulated by the gambling spirit of commerce until Corinth became a proverb of corruption. A Corinthian shown in a Greek play would always be drunk. The verb form of Corinthian meant "to have intercourse with prostitutes." At the same time it was a very religious city. At least in the early city, and perhaps later, one thousand prostitutes were provided at the temple of Aphrodite. Pausanias described forty-six objects of worship (twelve of which were temples) on only one street in Corinth. It is fitting that Paul's description of human degeneracy in Romans 1-3 was written from the city of Corinth.

The Origin of the Church

The story of the founding of the church is told in Acts 18:1-17. As the first to preach Christ in Corinth, Paul arrived in March of 51 A.D. (Hoehner). His ministry began with Aquila and Priscilla in the synagogue and soon moved next door to the house of Titus Justus. Encouraged by the Lord in a vision, he remained in the city for eighteen months. This contrasted sharply with the brief duration of his ministry in the Macedonian cities prior to coming to Corinth. Corinth was a strategic city because if the gospel could work there, it could work anywhere. First Corinthians 6:9-11 records some of the sins from which the Corinthians had been saved. Nevertheless, as the two epistles demonstrate, much paganism had been carried over into the church. Their failure to uphold the standards of Christ was not obvious against such a dark background. The diversity of cultural and social background coupled with the volatile nature of the environment tended to foster divisions. This, and not real differences in Apollos, Peter or Paul, account for the factions of 1 Corinthians 1. Certainly the Corinthian church was not an ideal "New Testament" model of exemplary Christianity. Nevertheless, the grace of God produced a rich source of instruction for believers of every age. Few biblical books share a more similar background to the latter third of the twentieth century in much of Western civilization in general and in America in particular.

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Paul's Relationship with the Corinthians

A summary of the Pauline contacts and correspondence is helpful to the study of the Corinthian epistles.

1. Paul visited Corinth on his second missionary journey (March 51-September 52) (Acts 18:1-17).
2. Paul left Corinth for Ephesus with Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:18-19).
3. Paul sent Apollos to Corinth for a time (Acts 18:27; 19:1; 1 Cor. 16:12).
4. Paul wrote a letter, now lost, in which he condemned an immoral man in Corinth (1 Cor. 5:9).
5. After disturbing news from Corinth and a letter requesting information, Paul wrote our 1 Corinthians. His answers to their questions are marked by (now concerning). This letter was carried by Titus (Spring 56).
6. Timothy arrived from Macedonia (Acts 19:22; 1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10) to find Paul's authority questioned. Unable to handle the problem, Timothy returned to Paul (2 Cor. 10:7-10; 11:23; 12:16, 17).
7. Upon receiving this report, Paul left Ephesus and paid a short painful visit to Corinth, in which he was grossly insulted (2 Cor. 2:1, 5-8; 7:12; 12:1; 13:1).
8. Paul wrote a third letter (now lost) characterized as very severe (2 Cor. 2:3-9; 7:8-12).
9. Unable to wait in Troas for Titus (who took the severe letter), Paul went to Macedonia to meet him. Relieved at the positive results, Paul wrote his fourth letter (our 2 Corinthians) (Oct. 56) (2 Cor. 2:13; 7:6-16).
10. Paul visited Corinth, during which time he wrote Romans (Nov. 56-Feb. 57) (Acts 19:21; 20:3; Rom. 16:1, 23). (Source: J.D. Pentecost class notes and S.L. Johnson, Wycliffe Bible Commentary, pp. 1227-9)

Author and Date

There is general agreement that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. External and internal evidence agree. It is attested as early as 95 A.D. by Clement of Rome, who appealed to Corinthians as "the letter of the blessed Paul the Apostle" (ICC , p. xvii). The book was written from Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:8) in 56 A.D.

Occasion of Writing

Paul had received reports of division within the church (1 Cor. 1:11; 16:17). Secondly, he wrote to answer the letter sent to him by Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus (1 Cor. 16:17). These questions were answered by the recurring phrase (now concerning) in 1 Corinthians 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12. Thirdly, Paul wrote out of anxious love and concern for the doctrinal purity and Christian behavior of the believers in Corinth (ICC, p. xxi).

SIMPLIFIED OUTLINE OF 1 CORINTHIANS

I. Introduction	1a
II. Divisions	1b-4
A. The quarrels and the Cross	1
B. God's wisdom versus man's	2

C. United ministry	3-4
III. Disorders	5-6
A. Discipline in church	5
B. Lawsuits and immorality	6
IV. Difficulties	7-14
A. Marriage	7
B. Christian liberty (food sacrificed to idols)	8-10
1. Liberty	8
2. Limitations	9
3. Liability	10
C. Worship	11
D. Spiritual gifts	12-14
1. Unity in diversity	12
2. Exercise in love	13
3. Priorities in church	14
V. Doctrine—resurrection	15
VI. Conclusion	16

OUTLINE OF 1 CORINTHIANS

I. Introduction	1:1-2
A. The writer	1:1
B. The recipients	1:2
1. God's church in Corinth	
2. Those set apart for holy living in Christ Jesus	
3. All everywhere who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ	
C. The salutation	1:3
D. The prayer of thanksgiving	1:4-9
1. For grace	1:4-6
2. For an expectant attitude	1:7-9
II. Divisions--an appeal for unity	1:10-4:21
A. The appeal	1:10
B. The quarrel's lack of foundation	1:11-17
1. The source of information	1:11-12
2. Unity in ministry	1:13
3. Preaching in power	1:14-17
C. The basis for unity	1:18-3:4

1. The message of the Cross	1:18-2:5
a. The contrast between God's wisdom and man's wisdom	1:18-25
b. The message of God's power	1:26-31
1) Not based on wisdom, influence or birth	1:26
2) Eliminates boasting	1:27-31
c. Preaching manifesting the power of God	2:1-5
2. God's secret wisdom for the discerning	2:6-3:4
a. Wisdom for the mature	2:6-7
b. Wisdom unknown to Christ's crucifiers	2:8
c. Spiritual revelation in contrast to natural understanding	2:9-3:4
1) Natural limitation	2:9
2) Revelation by the Spirit	2:10-12
3) Communication of wisdom	2:13
4) Perception of spiritual truth	2:14-3:4
a) The natural man	2:14
b) The spiritual man	2:15-16
c) The worldly man	3:1-4
D. The appeal for unity	3:5-4:21
1. The nature of the ministry—servants who are God's workers	3:5-9
2. The responsibility of the ministry—being expert builders	3:10-17
a. The commission	3:1-11
b. The construction	3:12-15
c. The caution	3:16-17
3. The contrast of the ministry with the standards of this age	3:18-23
4. The requirement of the ministry—faithfulness	4:1-5
a. Servants entrusted with God's message	4:1
b. Requirement of faithfulness to God	4:2-4
c. The Lord's coming rending final judgment	4:5
5. The application	4:6-21
a. No basis for pride	4:6-8
b. The pattern of Paul	4:9-13
c. The concern of Paul	4:14-21
1). The appeal	4:14-16
2). The instructor	4:17
3). The promise	4:18-21
III. Disorders--the appeal for discipline	5:1-6:20
A. A case of immorality	5:1-13
1. The report	5:1-2

a. The sin	5:1
b. The response	5:2
2. The solution	5:3-5
3. The principle	5:6-8
4. The extent of church discipline	5:9-13
B. Lawsuits	6:1-11
1. The problem	6:1-6
2. The solution	6:7-11
a. The principle	6:7-8
b. The implications	6:9-11
C. Immorality	6:12-20
1. The limitations of liberty	6:12
2. The principles of liberty	6:13-20
a. The purpose of bodily desire	6:13
b. The position in Christ	6:14-17
c. The practice of honoring God	6:18-20
IV. Difficulties—their questions answered	7:1-14:40
A. Marriage	7:1-40
1. The principles of marriage	7:1-7
a. The acceptability of singleness	7:1
b. Immorality prevented by marriage	7:2
c. Marriage responsibilities	7:3-5
d. Pauline preferences	7:6-7
2. The problems of marriage	7:8-40
a. The unmarried	7:8-9
b. Married believers	7:10-11
c. Mixed marriages	7:12-16
d. Acceptance of present status	7:17-24
e. The virgins	7:25-38
1) Introduction	7:25
2) Reasons for singleness	7:26-35
a) The present crisis	7:26-28
b) The shortness of time	7:29-31
c) Freedom from concern	7:32-35
3) Parental encouragement	7:36-38
f. Widows	7:39-40
B. Food sacrificed to idols	8:1-11:1
1. Statement of Christian liberty	8:1-8

a. Superiority of love	8:1-3
b. Supremacy of God over idols	8:4-6
c. Seriousness of defiling conscience	8:7-8
2. Limitation on exercise of liberty	8:9-13
a. Causing a stumbling block	8:9-12
b. Application	8:13
3. Illustration of limitation	9:1-27
a. The demonstration of rights	9:1-18
1) A statement of rights	9:1-12a
2) A refusal to exercise rights	9:12b-18
b. The demands of priorities	9:19-23
c. The discipline of self-control	9:24-27
4. The danger of unlimited liberty	10:1-22
a. Warning from Israel's history	10:1-13
1) Israel's privilege	10:1-4
2) God's displeasure	10:5
3) The failure of misusing liberty	10:6-10
a) Lust	10:6
b) Idolatry	10:7
c) Immorality	10:8
d) Unbelief	10:9
e) Grumbling	10:10
4) The appeal	10:11-13
a) Heeding the warning	10:11
b) Avoiding self-confidence	10:12
c) Accepting the provision	10:13
b. Application of the principles	10:14-11:1
1) Fleeing idolatry	10:14-22
a) The command	10:14
b) The argument	10:15-22
1) Joint participation in Christ	10:15-17
2) Joint participation with demons	10:18-20
3) Cannot do both	10:21-22
c) Exercising discernment	10:23-11:1
1) Seeking the beneficial and constructive	10:23
2) Seeking the good of others	10:24
3) Enjoying God's provision	10:25-27
4) Letting conscience have priority over freedom	10:28-30

5) Seeking God's glory	10:31
6) Causing none to stumble	10:32
7) Seeking the good of many	10:33
8) Being an example	11:1
C. Worship in the assembly	11:2-34
1. Propriety in headship	11:2-16
a. Basis in the divine order	11:2-6
1) Commendation	11:2
2) Instruction	11:3-6
b. Basis in creation	11:7-12
1) Position of man	11:7
2) Position of woman	11:8-10
a) Origin of woman	11:8
b) Purpose of woman	11:9
c) Subjection of woman	11:10
3) Mutual interdependence	11:11-12
c. Basis in nature	11:13-16
2. Propriety at the Lord's Table	11:17-34
a. Pauline indignation	11:17-22
1) Disorder in assembly	11:17-19
2) Disorder at the Lord's Supper	11:20-22
b. Pauline instruction of the Lord's Supper	11:23-34
1) Institution of the Supper	11:23-26
2) Participation in the Supper	11:27-32
a) An unworthy manner	11:27
b) Self-examination	11:28-32
c. Summary appeal	11:33-34
D. Spiritual gifts	12:1-14:40
1. The unity of gifts	12:1-11
a. Determining the ministry of the Holy Spirit	12:1-3
b. Unity of gifts in one source	12:4-6
c. Unity of purpose	12:7
d. Unity in diversity of gifts	12:8-11
2. The diversity of gifts	12:12-30
a. The analogy of the human body	12:12-26
1) The baptism of the Spirit	12:12-13
2) The necessity of diversity	12:14-20
3) The necessity of unity	12:21-26

b. The application to the church	12:27-30
3. The exercise of gifts in love	12:31-13:13
a. The superiority of love	12:31-13:3
b. The characteristics of love	13:4-7
c. The endurance of love	13:8-13
4. The priority of gifts	14:1-25
a. The superiority of prophecy	14:1-5
b. The inferiority of tongues	14:6-19
1) Does not edify the church	14:6-12
2) Needs interpretation	14:13-17
3) Instruction preferable	14:18-19
c. The purpose of tongues	14:20-22
d. The value of prophecy	14:23-25
5. Summary of instructions	14:26-40
a. Concerning exercise of gifts	14:26-33a
1) Goal of edification	14:26
2) Proper use of tongues	14:27-28
3) Proper use of prophecy	14:29-33a
b. Concerning women	14:33b-36
c. Conclusion	14:37-40
1) Recognizing authority	14:37-39
2) Being orderly	14:40
E. Doctrine—the resurrection explained	15:1-58
1. The confirmation of the resurrection	15:1-11
a. The source of the gospel	15:1-3a
b. The content of the gospel	15:3b-4
c. The witnesses to the resurrection	15:5-11
1) Apostolic testimony	15:5-7
2) Pauline testimony	15:8-11
2. The consequences of resurrection denial	15:12-19
a. Contradiction stated	15:12
b. Consequences stated	15:13-19
1) Christ not raised	15:13
2) Gospel empty of content	15:14a
3) Faith empty of content	15:14b
4) Apostles as false witnesses	15:15-16
5) Believers still in their sins	15:17
6) Dead believers having perished	15:18

7) Believers to be pitied	15:19
3. The consequences of resurrection truth	15:20-28
a. First fruits of more to come	15:20-23a
b. Believers	15:23b
c. Kingdom delivered to the Father	15:24-25
c. Death destroyed	15:26
d. Subjection of all to God	15:27-28
4. The confirmation of resurrection by conduct	15:29-34
a. Baptism concerning the dead	15:29
b. Struggle of Paul	15:30-32
c. Exhortation of Paul	15:33-34
5. The nature of resurrection	15:35-57
a. Illustration from nature	15:35-41
1) Death preceding resurrection	15:35-36
2) Resurrection body not identical with dying body	15:37
3) All flesh not the same	15:38-51
b. Uniqueness of the resurrection body	15:42-49
1) Contrasts with dying body	15:42-44
2) Contrasts with Adamic body	15:45-49
c. Transformation of living bodies	15:50-57
1) Transformed to immortal bodies	15:50-53
2) Triumph over death	15:54-57
6. Concluding appeal	15:58
VI. The collection	16:1-4
VII. Conclusion	16:5-24
A. Personal requests and exhortations	16:5-18
1. Preparation for coming visit	16:5-9
2. Acceptance of Timothy	16:10-11
3. Apollos not coming	16:12
4. Exhortation	16:13-14
5. Respect for leaders	16:15-18
B. Salutations	16:19-24
1. From the churches	16:19-20
2. From Paul	16:21-24

ARGUMENT OF 1 CORINTHIANS

Five or six years before, Paul had spent eighteen months in Corinth. Recently things had been in turmoil and, upon receiving a delegation of three men from the church (16:17), Paul answered their questions and sought to set straight some doctrinal and practical problems that were disturbing the unity of the local assembly.

Paul began with his identification of Apostolic call and associated himself with Sosthenes, a former synagogue ruler in Corinth (Acts 18:17). He addressed the church of God (not of Paul) in Corinth, whom he characterized as sanctified (set apart) in Christ Jesus and called to a life of holiness. No more fitting challenge could be issued to a church living in "sin city" of the ancient Roman Empire. In addition, he also anticipated a readership of believers in many places (1:1-9).

After thanking God for his grace to the Corinthians, Paul dealt with the first problem in the church, brought to his attention by some in Chloe's household. These quarrels, he said, had no basis in fact, as the leaders whom the various parties claimed were not in any conflict. In fact, Paul himself did not baptize more than a few in the church. His task was to preach the gospel, which is in contrast to every form of human wisdom (1:10-17). The Corinthians' basis of unity was to be found in the message of the Cross. This message is the power of God and wisdom of God. It does not depend on eloquence or man's wisdom. It is understood only by those who are spiritually mature as revealed by the Holy Spirit. It is not grasped by the natural man (1:18-3:4).

Paul appealed for unity on the basis of the ministry itself. God's servants are his fellow workers who are responsible to become expert builders, building with proper motivation and costly, durable materials (3:5-17). Such a ministry contrasts with the standards of this age (3:18-23). Those who have been given such a ministry are responsible to God to be faithful to him, who will render final judgment (4:1-5). The conclusion and application of the problem of divisions, Paul said, was that there was no basis for pride. Rather, they should follow the apostolic example. Though rejected by the world, Paul loved the Corinthians as a father and planned to send Timothy as his representative. When the Lord permitted, Paul himself planned to come to Corinth (4:6-21).

The second area of concern to which Paul addressed himself was three disorders to which the local believers needed to apply discipline. A specific case of immorality within the church needed the remedial excommunication of the sinning brother. Lawsuits with other believers taken to unbelievers needed to be taken care of within the church. Finally, he demonstrated that their "liberty" did not extend to sexual immorality. Rather, they belong to God and should glorify him with their bodies (5:1-6:20).

The third concern to which Paul addressed himself was the four difficulties about which they had written to him. (1) Marriage was not essential for everyone, but depended on one's gift. Personally, Paul preferred singleness but felt marriage was necessary for those lacking in self-control. The unmarried should remain single. Married believers are not permitted divorce and remarriage; but believers may allow the unbelieving partner to depart if they choose, though, if they remain, it is better. The goal is to remain in the present status and vocation in which one was when God called him to faith. Virgins are better off remaining single but parents may allow their daughters to marry. Widows may marry another believer, but Paul felt they will be happier if they stay single (7:1-40).

(2) The question concerning food sacrificed to idols (ch. 8-10) was more difficult to answer since Paul was trying to prove two separate things. On the one hand, meat offered to idols is not "contaminated," but, on the other hand, Christians must not participate directly in pagan feasts where demons are involved. The controlling factor for Paul was love, not knowledge. Idols are nothing but not every believer is able to develop the freedom to practice this knowledge. The strong ought not to exercise their freedom to the detriment of the weak brother (8:1-13). By way of illustration Paul had liberty to be married and receive support from his preaching. He denied the exercise of his rights, however, in order to further his gospel ministry. This restraint is similar to the runner and the boxer who must use strict discipline to keep their bodies under control. Only in this way could Paul assure himself that after preaching to others, he would not be disqualified for the prize of reward (9:1-27).

Privilege and knowledge are no guarantee of success, as illustrated by Israel in the wilderness. Their divine judgment ought to serve as a warning so that we not follow their example of setting their hearts on evil things. On this basis Paul appealed to his readers to heed the warning, avoid self-confidence and use the provision of God's way of escape out of temptation to sin (10:1-13).

In summary, Paul's argument was that we ought to flee idolatry. Participation in the Lord's Table is a joint identification with Christ in his death and with one another. In a similar way, participation in an idol feast is a joint participation in the worship of demons. It should be obvious that believers cannot do both (10:14-22). In the areas of Christian liberty, all that is permissible is not necessarily beneficial and constructive. The goal should be to seek the good of others. God's provision should be enjoyed without asking questions. If someone makes an issue of the meat's origin, then for his conscience do not eat. Paul said we ought to seek the glory of God, cause none to stumble, seek the good of the majority and, above all, be an example.

At this point Paul interrupted his answering of questions to deal with some problems in the worship of the assembly. He did praise them for trying to keep his teaching of the priorities of headship based on the divine order and in creation. A woman's head covering ought to reflect her submission. On the issue of the chaos in the meeting, however, he had no praise. He was indignant at their divisions and harmful manner of remembering the Lord's Supper by accentuating social distinctions to the point of humiliating the poor. He then reminded them of the instructions given him by the risen Lord Jesus directly (11:1-34).

(3) Returning to their questions, he dealt with the subject of spiritual gifts in some detail. Though gifts are different, they come from the same Holy Spirit, thus promoting unity out of diversity. This is illustrated by the human body (12:1-30). The Corinthians were coveting the "showy" gifts, but the more excellent way is the way of love, which is the most enduring (12:31- 13:13). The Corinthians made much of the gift of tongues, but prophecy is much superior since tongues do not edify and need interpretation. In the local assembly instruction is preferable because it edifies the church. Tongues are a sign for unbelievers and must be exercised under certain conditions, which Paul laid down (14:1-40).

For the second time Paul interrupted his answers to their questions. This time he reminded them of his gospel and the centrality of the resurrection, which some of them

were apparently confused about. The consequences of the denial of resurrection are tragic but the truth is both an encouragement and a challenge to motivation for proper conduct (15:1-34). There is an intimation that there were some questions asked by them which he then answered of the nature of the resurrection. It must be preceded by death and results in a new and different body as illustrated by creation. Those living at Christ's return will also receive transformed bodies and the triumph over death will be complete.

(4) Finally, Paul dealt with their questions for the collection he was assembling for the church in Jerusalem. Some of their own men would be responsible for transporting the gift, possibly accompanied by Paul.

In conclusion, Paul made some personal requests and exhortations concerning his proposed visit, their acceptance of Timothy, Apollos not going and a challenge to courage, love and submission to church leaders. The epistle concludes with salutations from the church in Asia to Corinth and from Paul personally.