

Paul's First Letter to the Church at Corinth

History is ever subject to our idealized reflections. At times the past was actually more ideal than our present, and we long to return to “the good old days.” More often this longing results from the rose-colored lenses of myopia and amnesia. What is true of history in general proves particularly true regarding the history of the Christian faith. Procedures change with the times and some of us begin longing for “the good old days.” Church gets complicated and burdensome with its endless litany of programs and all of us long to return to simpler times. And sometimes, when our myopia and amnesia are particularly acute, we think that if we would only model ourselves on the early church all of our problems would be resolved.

For whatever reason we've all thought it, and the bravest among us have even said it. At some point we've all longed to get back to the days of the early church, thinking that will be our salvation. In some ways, it would be a worthy endeavor; yet, we come across a letter like 1 Corinthians and it causes us to pause and perhaps change our mind. Even a cursory reading reveals some troubling issues within this early Christian community. They argue about which apostle is the most authoritative, leading to inflated egos and factions within the community (1.10-4.21). There are other issues as well—sexual immorality (5.1-13), lawsuits among believers (6.1-11), fornication and libertinism (6.12-20), questions regarding sexuality (7.1-40), confusion about eating food sacrificed to idols (8.1-13; 10.23-31), abuses of the common meal (11.17-34), jockeying for status and honor based on spiritual gifts (12-14) and debates about the resurrection of the dead (15). So, who wants to be a member at Corinth? Who wants to get back to the “good old days”?

This much is clear: the earliest Christian communities struggled to understand and apply the teachings of Jesus as much as we do. The issues may be different, but there are not any “good old days” to which we should strive to return. There is only a call to live according to the wisdom of God (1.30), to allow “the mind of Christ” to be our guide (2.16b) and to let love inform all that we do (13), all of which will lead to unity of mind and purpose (1.10b). These are the exhortations Paul sets before the Corinthians, addressing all of their struggles from the perspective of “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (2.2), a message of divine wisdom that seems weak and foolish yet proves “wiser than human wisdom” and “stronger than human strength” (1.25). In “the message of the cross” Paul declares a wisdom that subverts the wisdom of the world by exposing it as folly and rendering it invalid (1.20-25). Instead of living according to worldly wisdom that results in hubris, factions, debates, selfishness, and immorality, the Corinthians are to live according to divine wisdom that results in humility, selflessness, and love—blessing when reviled, enduring when persecuted and speaking kindly when slandered (4.12-13a).

Paul's relationship with the Corinthian converts is a lengthy and complex matter. The wealth of information provided by Acts and two extant letters to the Corinthians supply endless intrigue to any serious student of the Bible. According to Acts 18, it was after a brief stay in Athens that Paul first came to Corinth.¹ Here he met Priscilla and Aquila, fellow Jewish leather workers expelled from Rome by the edict of Emperor Claudius (18.1-2), who helped establish the community of faith.² According to Acts 18.11, Paul stayed at Corinth for eighteen months, at

¹ Roman Corinth (built by Julius Caesar in 44 BC on the ruins of Greek Corinth) was “located at a strategic point on the isthmus that connected the Peloponnesian peninsula to the southern mainland section of Greece,” Marion Soards, *New International Biblical Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Press, 1999), 3-4. This made it an important commercial center that attracted a diverse populous. Due to the perils of sea travel in those days, many “brought their [ships] to harbor in one of Corinth's two ports and had the ships brought into dry dock and unloaded or hauled across the isthmus to be put back in the water at the other gulf harbor” (Ibid., 5). As a result, by Paul's day the city had roughly 80,000 inhabitants with another 20,000 living in the surrounding countryside, making it possibly “the wealthiest city in Greece and a major, multicultural urban center,” Craig Blomberg, *NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 19. The city was an amalgam of socio-economic levels, languages, occupations, and religious and political views. By Paul's time, “Corinth had developed a reputation for possessing wealth without culture and for abusing its poor, details,” J. Paul Sampley, *The New Interpreter's Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2035. Put another way, “what most controlled the city's life and defined its moral characters was...a relentless competition for social status, honor, wealth, and power,” a description that fits well with the issues addressed by Paul, all of which, in some way or another, are fueled by these ubiquitous pursuits, Victor Paul Furnish, *New Testament Theology: The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians*, (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2.

² Raymond Brown suggests that Paul arrived in AD 50/51, *An Introduction*, 514. This date is based on Priscilla and Aquila's presence in Corinth, Gallio's proconsulate, and the eighteen-month time frame given in Acts

which time he was put on trial before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia.³ No fault was found and, at some point following the trial, Paul departed Corinth, traveled to various cities (Acts 18.18-23), and then arrived at Ephesus where he remained for several years (Acts 19.1-10). After leaving Corinth, Paul received information about the Corinthian converts from two verbal reports (1 Cor 1.11, 5.1) and a formal letter sent by the community (1 Cor 7.1). In response, Paul sent several letters to the community (cf. 1 Cor 5.9), with the letter known to us as First Corinthians likely being written c. AD 56 during his stay at Ephesus (cf. 1 Cor 16.8).⁴

Paul's letter begins with a greeting (1.1-3) in which Paul introduces his co-author (Sosthenes, v 1), acknowledges his audience ("the church of God that is in Corinth," v2) and pronounces his traditional blessing upon them ("grace to you and peace," v3). This is followed by a thanksgiving (1.4-9), in which Paul recalls the "grace of God that has been given in Christ Jesus" (vv 4-7) and offers hope based on the faithfulness of God (vv 8-9). This leads to the body of the letter (1.10-15.58) where Paul addresses various issues in four major sections: 1.10-4.21 (worldly versus godly wisdom), 5.1-11.1 (problems within the community), 11.2-14.40 (orderly worship and spiritual gifts), and 15.1-58 (the resurrection of dead).⁵ Finally, Paul concludes (16.1-24) with instructions about the collection for the Jerusalem believers (vv 1-4), details his upcoming travel plans (vv 5-12), offers some parting admonitions (vv 13-14) and commendations (vv 15-18), a gives a litany of greetings (vv 19-21) coupled with a traditional conclusion (vv 22-24).⁶

The body of the letter begins in 1.10, opening with an appeal to the believers in Corinth. Paul invokes "the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1.10a) as the basis and authority for his plea that "all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (1.10b). The opening chapters (1.10/11-4.21)⁷ address

18.11 (see footnote 3). Acts 18.2 explains the presence of Priscilla and Aquila by mentioning their expulsion from Rome by an edict of Emperor Claudius. Regarding the date of this event, Brown notes, "if the information is historical, it probably does not refer to the action of Claudius in AD 41 ordering the overly numerous Roman Jews not to hold meetings but *not* driving them out. Rather it may refer to what Suetonius (*Claudius* 25.4) reports: 'He expelled Jews from Rome because of their constant disturbances impelled by Chrestus.' If these disturbances were over belief in Christ and if the 5th century Christian Orosius was right in dating this expulsion to AD 49, Priscilla and Aquila would have arrived in Corinth about a year before Paul," *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (New York: DoubleDay, 1996), 433, note 24.

³ A Roman proconsul was the governing authority of a region, something akin to a mayor or governor today. An inscription at the city of Delphi makes it possible to date Gallio's governance to AD 52-53. If we assume the eighteen months in Acts 18.11 is accurate, we can place Paul's arrival date sometime in AD 51. It is uncertain whether Acts 18.11 means that Paul's entire stay (from arrival to departure) was eighteen months or whether he was in Corinth for eighteen months before his trial. Acts 18.18, which directly follows the trial scene (18.12-17), is ambiguous. It could mean that Paul stayed in Corinth for "a considerable time" after the trial or it could be a summary statement about the eighteen month stay mentioned in 18.11.

⁴ Paul's relationship with the Corinthians was lengthy and complex. Brown summarizes the interactions as follows. Paul first arrived in Corinth in AD 50/51 and stayed there until AD 52. After his departure, other apostles arrived (Apollos, mentioned in Acts 17.24-28, and Cephas/Peter, mentioned in 1 Cor 1.12) who "may have catalyzed spirited elements within the Corinthian community, producing some of the enthusiasm that Paul would have to criticize in 1 Corinthians." Sometime during the period between his departure (c. AD 52) and the writing 1 Corinthians (c. AD 56) Paul wrote a now lost letter "warning the Corinthians not to have dealings with immoral people" (see 1 Cor 5.9). Then "while staying at Ephesus (AD 54-57), Paul got reports about Corinth, e.g., from 'those of Chloe' (1 Cor 1.11; also 11.18)" as well as "a letter from the Corinthians (1 Cor 7.1), perhaps in reply to his latter...and seemingly brought by Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16.17-18) who probably added their own reports." Finally, after receiving these verbal and written reports, Paul wrote what we now know as 1 Corinthians, Brown, *An Introduction*, 514-515.

⁵ Soards, *NIBC*, 7. Though the letter is outlined variously, this basic division is followed by most commentators. Variations are due to ending or beginning thought units in slightly different locations. For example, Raymond Brown outlines the body as follows: factions (1.10-4.21), problems of behavior (5.1-11.34), problems of charisms and the response of love (12.1-14.40), and the resurrection of Christ and the Christian (15.1-58), *An Introduction*, 512. Wayne Meeks and John Fitzgerald offer the following: thesis (1.10), factions (1.11-4.21), purity (5-7), freedom and responsibility (8.1-11.1), behavior in worship (11.2-14.40), resurrection (15), *The Writings of St. Paul*, (New York: Norton & Co., 2007), 23. Luke T. Johnson sees chaps. 1-4 addressing the church of God, chaps. 5-10 the church in the world, chaps. 11-14 the world in the church, and chap. 15 the church and the kingdom, *The Writings of the New Testament*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 276-290.

⁶ cf. Rom 16.20b, 2 Cor 13.14; Gal 6.18; Phil 4.23; 1 Thess 5.28; Phlm 25

⁷ Most commentators see 1.10 as the beginning of the opening unity of thought that contrasts divine and human wisdom (see note 5). Thus, unity results from accepting and living by the wisdom of God proclaimed in the message of the cross rather than accepting and living by worldly wisdom which has led to factions. However, Meeks and Fitzgerald suggest that 1.10 be seen as the thesis of the entire letter, with everything that follows understood as an effort to restore unity of mind and purpose. This seems a plausible reading whether one joins 1.10 with 1.11-4.21 or not. Either way, the theology set forth in 1.10-4.21 appears to inform all the issues Paul addresses. In other words, the contrast between divine and human wisdom influences Paul's responses to the issues of sexual immorality, lawsuits, factions, spiritual gifts, etc (see notes 9, 14, 15).

factions that have arisen based on apostolic association by contrasting the wisdom of God with the wisdom of the world. Operating by worldly wisdom, the Corinthian converts have divided over pride of place. Though they “have the mind of Christ” (2.16b), they are not acting accordingly, so Paul can “not speak to [them] as spiritual people [those acting according to divine wisdom], but rather as people of the flesh [those acting according with human wisdom], as infants in Christ...For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among [them], are [they] not of the flesh, behaving according to human inclinations?” (3.1, 3). Paul reveals the folly of seeking to gain status in the community through association with apostolic figures who are merely “servants through whom [the Corinthians] came to believe” (3.8). This entire section is devoted to refuting factionalism in the congregation so that “none...will be puffed up in favor of one against another” (4.6b) and “all [will] be in agreement and...united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1.10b). It is through the message of the cross that the wisdom and power of God is made manifest (1.18),⁸ and by acting in accordance with divine wisdom the factions and divisions will cease and unity resume.

5.1 denotes a transition to the other issues Paul will address, all of which pertain to relationships within the community of faith (5.1-11.1).⁹ 5.1-13 opens this new section with an exasperated declaration meant to shame the congregation into repentance: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you!” The problem is “a man [who] is living with his father’s wife” (5.1b)¹⁰ and a congregation who is celebrating this behavior (perhaps as a misguided expression of their Christian liberty), which is as scandalous in Paul’s eyes as the act itself. In response, Paul pronounces judgment regarding both the sexual deviance (5.3-5) and the boasting (5.6-8), and then clarifies his previous instructions about interacting with “sexually immoral persons.”¹¹ 6.1-11 responds to the matter of lawsuits among the Corinthian believers,

⁸ Furnish notes the audacity of such a claim because “a cross, that infamous Roman instrument of execution, would be identified immediately by anyone in Roman Corinth with weakness, failure, shame, and death.” Thus, Paul’s equation of the cross with the wisdom and power of God “accentuate[s] the radical disparity, even contradiction, that he sees between the wisdom of God and what passes for wisdom in this world,” *NT Theology*, 39. In 2.8 Paul makes an intriguing statement—“none of the rulers understood [the wisdom of God]; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” What stands out is the conditionality (non-necessity) of Jesus’ death. Perhaps the traditional atonement models (ransom, satisfaction, or penal substitution) need to be reexamined in light of this comment. Perhaps the foolishness of the cross, so often interpreted as a veiled reference to Jesus’ death for sins, should be understood as a message of non-violence by which God redeems the world through the faithfulness of Jesus. For an explication of a non-violent atonement model see J. Denny Weaver, *The Non-Violent Atonement*, (Eerdmans, 2001).

⁹ “The issues taken up in the second section, 5.1-11.1, all derive from the church’s struggle to *be* the church in a world to which it does not belong,” Furnish, *NT Theology*, 16. In these chapters Paul builds upon the contrast between divine and worldly wisdom, with the call to live according to God’s wisdom revealed in the message of the cross informing everything he says. Spiritual arrogance is the issue in 1.10-4.21, and it continues to be the underlying concern in 5.1-11.1. Throughout the letter, Paul addresses a variety of issues as “symptom[s] of the true, deeper problem that he faces among the Corinthians, namely, their spiritual arrogance, which produces elitism or indifference that renders the congregation inactive and ineffective in living out God’s will for their lives in this world,” Soards, *NIBC*, 109. The statement, “it is actually reported” (5.1) indicates that what follows is in response to reports Paul had received from some unnamed person(s), just as the issues addressed in 1.10-4.21 were based on the report by “Chloe’s people” (1.11a).

¹⁰ As Hans Conzelmann notes, the phrase “his father’s wife” most likely refers to a step-mother, based on the Septuagint’s use of the phrase in Lev 18.8. Paul’s comment that this immorality is “of a kind that is not found even among the pagans” reflects the fact that “marriage between stepmother and stepson is forbidden both by Jewish and by Roman law,” *Hermeneia: 1 Corinthians*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 96. Raymond Brown notes that Paul’s comment, this “is not found even among pagans” (5.1b), could suggest “that Gentile converts to Christianity at Corinth had mistakenly taken Paul’s proclamation of freedom to mean that there were no old rules of behavior (see also 1 Cor 6.12),” *An Introduction*, 518. Whether the father died or merely divorced his wife, Paul critiques this sexual deviant (5.3-4) as well as the community’s celebration of behavior they should have condemned (5.2, 6-8).

¹¹ In 5.9 Paul mentions a letter he wrote previously. Two prevalent views are that this letter has not survived or that it is preserved in 2 Corinthians 6.14-7.1. Those who hold the latter view tend to see 2 Corinthians as “an edited composite of several notes” written by Paul to the community at Corinth (Johnson, *The Writings*, 275). Apparently, the instruction “not to associate with sexually immoral persons” (5.9a) given in this previous letter was misunderstood. Paul clarifies his intentions by adding the phrase “who bears the name of brother or sisters” (5.11b). Paul prohibits them from interacting with sexual deviants who call themselves believers. Given the context, it appears that this would be applicable to those who persist in and celebrate such behavior rather than a believer who has a lapse in judgment and repents. The intent of Paul’s command to expel this man (5.5) is revealed by Soards explanation: “In the church God trusts the assembly, empowered by the Spirit, to judge and to correct one another. In relation to those outside the church, the battle against sin is God’s work.” By “handing the man over to Satan” (5.5a) the man “is put back in the context of the world, where the church can no longer fail him and where his only real hope is the saving power of God at work in Jesus Christ,” *NIBC*, 113, 114. Paul’s response seems to reflect the thought of Matthew 18.15-20, where Jesus says that an unrepentant believer is to be treated as “a Gentile and tax collector” (v 17). The purpose of Jesus’ instruction is often misunderstood, as it Paul’s. If the Christian community treated Gentiles and tax collectors like the religious leaders of the day (rejection, avoidance, critique, condemnation), it would be confusing given Jesus’ call to limitless forgiveness that follows (vv 21-22). In the

and **6.12-20** discusses Christian freedom and responsibility. Paul stresses that liberty is not to be construed as libertinism, since everything that believers deem permissible (6.12-13) should be qualified by the understanding that “the body [community or individual?] is not meant for fornication [libertinism?] but for the Lord and the Lord for the body” (6.13).¹² In **7.1-40** Paul responds to two questions sent by the Corinthians in a previous letter (7.1)—marital relationships (7.2-16, 25-40)¹³ and the circumstances of the individual vis-à-vis the time of their calling (7.17-24)—and reveals the eschatological outlook influencing his thoughts (cf. 7.29-31).¹⁴ From Paul’s vantage point, life has been transformed by accepting the wisdom of God (cf. 1.10-4.21), which makes living according to the foolish wisdom of God more important than one’s gifts (7.1-7) or circumstances (7.8-40).¹⁵ Everything in life is submitted to the scrutiny of obedience

Kingdom of God, however, treating the unrepentant “as a Gentile and tax collector” does not mean excluding and shunning them, but following Jesus’ practice of eating and fellowshiping with them and loving them into the kingdom of God, Warren Carter, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 1779, note 18.16-17. Such action “aims at regaining the brother [or sister]...In the wider narrative context of the gospel of Matthew, to say that the expelled sinner must be ‘as a Gentile and a tax collector’ cannot mean that the person becomes a pariah to be shunned by the church; it means, rather, that the person becomes an object of the community’s missionary efforts,” Richard B. Hayes, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco), 102. Both Jesus’ and Paul’s instructions are ultimately aimed at redemption.

¹² Given the extensive use of the plural form of “you” in vv 19-20 (Soards, *NIBC*, 136), it is possible (perhaps, best) to understand this entire section as a statement about the community itself, not merely the individuals therein. Our society is one which exalts the individual over the collective, and this colors our reading of biblical texts which, more often than not, exalt the collective over the individual. Reading this text from the perspective of the collective community makes it possible to understand Paul’s references to fornication / prostitution (vv 13b, 15b-16, 18) as manifestations of Corinthian libertinism (“all things are lawful for me,” v 12) rather than sexual immorality per se. Paul’s underlying critique seems to be the negative affects of libertinism on the community (“not all things are beneficial,” v 12), rather than a critique of particular, individual actions. Libertinism misunderstands the purpose of Christian freedom, which is to serve the Lord as members of Christ (v 13b, 15) and therefore glorify God in your body (community?) (v 20). Paul compares the unqualified freedom (“all things are lawful for me”) championed by the Corinthians to prostitution/fornication that degrades the entire body (community) through its union (vv 15-16). J. Murphy O’Connors rightly sees verse 18a (“every sin a person commits is outside the body”) as a Corinthian slogan (like those in vv 12-13; cf. 1.12; 3.4; 7.1; 8.1, 4; 10.23; 14.34-35), which Paul quotes and then qualifies/refutes in v 18b (“but fornication sins against the body itself”), “Corinthians Slogans in 1 Cor 6.12-20,” *Catholic Bible Quarterly* 40 [1978], pp 391-396. Therefore, in vv 12-20 Paul uses sexual liaisons with prostitutes as a foil to critique the Corinthians believers who fail to recognize that as “members of Christ” (v15) their libertinism (manifested in a variety of actions detailed throughout the letter) is akin to “tak[ing] the members of Christ and mak[ing] them members of a prostitute” (v 15). Because the community is “a temple of the Holy Spirit” (v 19), intended to “glorify God” as a collective entity (v 20b), “the fornicator [libertine] sins against the community itself” (v 18b).

¹³ Of note is the equality Paul sets forth within the marriage relationship (cf. 11.11-12). There is no paternalism in Paul’s understanding of marriage here. The wife alone is not to submit to her husband, a perspective based on a misreading of statements found in the possibly pseudonymous letter to the believers at Ephesus. Here equality is emphasized—“the wife does not have authority over her own body...likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body” (7.4). Paul uses an image of mutual ownership of a spouse’s body to address sexual abstinence, which may be appropriate for an agreed upon time, but should not be the normal practice (cf. Conzelmann, *Hermeneia*, 115-118; Soards, *NIBC*, 137-142). Apparently some in the community believed that sexual abstinence led to moral and social superiority, an idea expressed in the Corinthian slogan, “it is well for a man not to touch a woman” (7.1b). Paul responds to this claim by revealing that celibacy is a gift that not everyone possesses (7.7). Therefore, as with the issue of food sacrificed to idols in chapter 8, Paul undermines claims of superiority based a supposedly superior knowledge (“it is better not to touch a woman”) by arguing that you are no better if you do not “touch a woman” and no better if you do (cf. 7.1-16; 8.8). In fact, if you don’t have the gift, it may be worse to remain celibate (see 7.5, 9).

¹⁴ As Soards notes, “Paul’s thought is relative to his thoroughgoing apocalyptic eschatology, as is clear from what follows in 7.31b: ‘For this world in its present form is passing away’...From Paul’s short-sighted apocalyptic perspective, social status is unimportant and not worthy one’s ultimate concern...[because] all of human existence is relativized in light of the conviction that God’s work is bringing this world to its end” (*NIBC*, 153, 156, 160). Conzelmann adds, for Paul “eschatology is an immediate exposition of existence...[which] determines the conduct of life,” (*Hermeneia*, 133). What matters is the Corinthian’s new status in relation to God (7.22), which supersedes any other social relations. Given the status-seeking behavior exposed and refuted thus far, Paul’s comments may be another effort to reveal the foolishness of power-mongering based on one’s knowledge and/or social standing. Using the categories of celibate and non-celibate (7.1-7), married and unmarried (7.8-16, 25-40), circumcised and uncircumcised (7.17-20), enslaved and free (7.21-24), “Paul portrays all humans as being on a level playing field” (Soards, *NIBC*, 156). His statements—“it is well for a man not to touch a woman, but because of cases of sexual immorality each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband” (v 1b-2); “in view of the impending crisis is it well for you to remain [unmarried]...but if you marry, you do not sin (vv 26, 28); “circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing” (v 19); and “whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a free person...just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ” (v 22)—“level the playing field” by revealing the neutrality of these circumstances and exalting obedience to God as ultimate standard (7.19b; see note 15 for further discussion).

¹⁵ Paul addresses two primary issues in 7.1-40, both of which hint at further divisions resulting from a desire for honor and status within the community. 7.1-7 deals with abstinence, removing it is a basis for pride of place by revealing that it is a gift of God, neither given to nor binding upon all. Paul’s rhetorical question in 4.7b is the thrust

to the commandments of God (7.19), because the present order governed by worldly wisdom is drawing to a close and the coming order governed by divine wisdom is drawing near (7.29, 31b). In **8.1-11.1** Paul takes up the question of the appropriateness of eating food sacrificed to idols.¹⁶ As with other issues, the focus is communal rather than individual (8.7-13) and the underlying emphasis is on the attitude informing one's actions (8.1-3). Those with the knowledge that "no idol in the world really exists" (8.4) are liberated to eat meat sacrificed to idols. However, not everyone in the community has this knowledge (8.7) and they are caused to "stumble" (eat idol meat despite their misgivings) (8.10). Therefore, Paul exhorts the knowledgeable to temper their behavior based on love—an approach practiced by Paul (9.1-27)—because knowledge alone puffs up the individual, but knowledge exercised in love builds up the collective (8.1b). Individual behavior is not determined solely by one's knowledge, but by love, which always makes the good of others a priority (10.24, 33; cf. chap. 13).

In **11.2-14.40** Paul takes up matters arising in the context of worship—head coverings (11.2-16), communion (11.17-33), and spiritual gifts (12.1-14.40).¹⁷ The well-known hymn to love in chap. 13 reveals the proper attitude for using spiritual gifts, but, in many ways, it also sums up the ideology underlying Paul's instructions throughout the letter. Rather than seeking to gain status and honor based on apostolic association (1.10-4.21), knowledge (5.1-11.1), or spiritual gifts (12.1-14.40), the Corinthians are to seek after "a still more excellent way" (12.31b), the way of love, that survives when all else passes away and leads to the unity of mind and purpose Paul desires to see manifested in the community (1.10b). In **15.1-58** Paul addresses confusion about the resurrection of the dead. Having already instructed them on the matter (vv 1-2), Paul reminds them of these teachings (vv 3-11), reveals the importance and necessity of Jesus' resurrection (vv 12-34), answers (the Corinthians?) questions regarding the resurrection body (vv 25-49), and proclaims the future hope that frees believers from fear of death (vv 50-58). For Paul, Jesus' resurrection is the *sine quo non* ("without which not") of Christian faith—"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins...[and] we are of all people to be most pitied" (vv 17, 19; cf. 14.32). The good news is that Christ has been raised (v 20) so faith is not in vain. The resurrection is God's "yes" to the divine wisdom proclaimed in the message of the cross, which overcomes the worst punishment worldly wisdom can exact (taking away a person's existence). Moreover, Jesus' resurrection provides a glimpse of creation's coming redemption (vv 20-23)—a time, a place, an age when hate is overcome by love (vv 24-28) and God is all in all (v 28b). Paul concludes his letter in **16.1-24** with instructions about his collection for the believers in Jerusalem (vv 1-3),¹⁸ information about his travel plans (vv 5-9) as

of his thought here as well. 7.8-40 addresses circumstances at the time of one's calling—marital status in 7.8-16, 25-40 and life status in 7.17-24. Throughout this section Paul's language recalls Gal 3.28, where various distinctions are noted—husband or wife, married or unmarried, widowed or never married, celibate or uncelibate, circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free—and then removed. As Conzelmann notes, "in the Church worldly differences are already abrogated," (*Hermeneia*, 126). In other words, one's status in the world has no influence on one's status in the community of faith. Given the factionalism of the congregation, which arose because members sought status and honor greater than their fellow believers, it seems likely that Paul is again rebuking egoism by reminding the Corinthians that neither the gift of sexual abstinence (7.2) nor the circumstances at the time of one's calling (7.8ff) are determinative of status in the community, because obedience to the commandments of God [divine wisdom in the cross] is everything (7.19). This section is yet another exhortation to live according to divine wisdom, which does not factionalize on the basis of apostolic influence (1.10-4.21), sexuality (7.1-9), marital status (7.10-16, 25-40), social/economic/occupational status (7.17-24), knowledge (8.1-10.32), or spiritual gifts (12-14), but strives for unity of mind and purpose (1.10).

¹⁶ Two primary issues are addressed—eating meat previously sacrificed to idols (8.1-7) and partaking of a meal in the temple of an idol (8.10). Paul's comments about idols are unclear (see Soards, *NIBC*, 176-181), which may reveal that the focus, once again, is on the application of Christian freedom and only tangentially a debate over whether idols are nothing (8.4-6) or something (10.14-22). By revealing that nothing is gained by eating or lost by refraining (8.8) and calling for knowledge to be tempered by love (8.9-9.27), Paul declares that Christian freedom is not libertinism. Rather, "real freedom is being freed from the necessity to assert only, or primarily, one's own rights" (Soards, *NIBC*, 176). Paul reveals that the underlying issue is not eating idol meal, but acting according to worldly or divine wisdom. Worldly wisdom takes advantage of any opportunity to help oneself. Divine wisdom takes advantage of any opportunity to help another. Worldly wisdom focuses on what is best for the individual. Divine wisdom focuses on what is best for the community. Worldly wisdom demands one's rights and privileges. Divine wisdom gladly gives up one's rights and privileges. cf. Phil 2.1-11; 1 Cor 1.10-4.21.

¹⁷ 5.1-14.40 is a thought unit addressing issues within the community. However, it is best to divide the contents into two sections, with 5.1-11.1 addressing issues in the broader context of community interactions and 11.2-14.40 addressing issues in the specific context of community worship.

¹⁸ cf. Rom 15.25-27, 30-33; 2 Cor 8-9; Gal 2.1-10. As Blomberg notes, "the collection...formed a major enterprise of [Paul's] third missionary journey [see Acts 18.23-20.38]. Significant numbers of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were impoverished (v 3; cf. Rom 15.26), and Paul spent substantial energy raising funds from various Gentile churches in Asia and Europe to help meet their needs (Acts 20.4). But in addition...Paul undoubtedly saw the collection as an opportunity to bring greater unity within the church across Jewish and Gentile boundaries," *NIV App*, 323.

well as those of Timothy (vv10-11) and Apollos (v 12), a final exhortation to live in love (vv 13-14), affirmations of the messengers from Corinth (vv 15-19), greeting from the churches of Asia (vv 19-20), and parting words written in Paul's own hand (vv 21-24).

Frederick Buechner once wrote that Love “leaves us the freedom to be the best and gladdest that we have it in us to become. The only freedom Love denies is the freedom to destroy ourselves.”¹⁹ It is this love that compels Paul to critique the Corinthian's actions that are informed by a wisdom that ultimately destroys (1.18a), and to proclaim a wisdom that ultimately redeems (1.18b). God's wisdom liberates by subverting the world's wisdom and offering a path to freedom that endures when all else fades away (13.13). The heart of 1 Corinthians is a proclamation of the wisdom of God, the wisdom of Love, which cannot be overcome even by death and leads to the reformation of creation into a realm where God is all in all (15.28). In sum, Paul declares that love is the way, the truth and the life that “leaves us the freedom to be the last and gladdest that we have it in us to become.”

Outline of and Commentaries on First Corinthians

¹⁹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 30.

Marion Soards²⁰

- 1.1-3 – Salutation
- 1.4-9 – Thanksgiving
- 1.10-15.58 – Body of the Letter
 - The Gospel and Wisdom, 1.10-4.21
 - Matters in the Everyday Life of the Corinthian Church, 5.1-11.1
 - The Need for Orderly Worship and the Practice of Spiritual Gifts, 11.2-14.40
 - The Truth of the Resurrection of the Dead, 15.1-58
- 16.1-18 – Parenthesis (Exhortation)
- 16.19-24 – Final Remarks

Raymond Brown²¹

DIVISION ACCORDING TO CONTENTS

- 1.1-9 – Address/greetings and Thanksgiving, reminding Corinthians of their spiritual gifts
- 1.10-4.21 – Part I: The factions
- 5.1-11.34 – Part II: Problems of behavior (incest, lawsuits, sexual behavior, marriage, food, eucharist, liturgy); what Paul has heard and questions put to him
- 12.1-14.40 – Part III: Problems of charisms and the response of love
- 15.1-58 – Part IV: The resurrection of Christ and of the Christian
- 16.1-18 – The collection, Paul’s travel plans, commendations of people
- 16.19-24 – Greetings; Paul’s own hand; ‘Our Lord, come.’

For Further Study

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²⁰ Soards, *NIBC*, 7.

²¹ Brown, *An Introduction*, 512