

1 Corinthians: a guided study

How does belonging to the crucified and risen Christ change a divided church?

First Corinthians addresses a gifted but divided congregation. Paul brings disputes over leaders, sexuality, marriage, food, worship, and resurrection back to Jesus Christ. The cross overturns status-seeking; resurrection gives the body and present faithfulness lasting significance. The goal is a community that builds others up through truth, holiness, and love rather than displaying its own importance.

Read the letter in its setting

Paul writes from Ephesus, where he expects to remain for a time, in the mid-AD 50s under common chronologies. Reports from Chloe's people and questions from the Corinthians supply part of the occasion. The letter does not preserve their complete correspondence, so reconstructions of their slogans and factions need care. Direct Pauline authorship is widely accepted, and chapter 16 connects the teaching to travel and the Jerusalem collection.

Biblical references: 1 Corinthians 1:10–17 · 1 Corinthians 7:1 · 1 Corinthians 16:5–9

Sources: primary, brown

Follow the argument

Read each correction as part of Paul's appeal to a shared identity in Christ. Chapters 1–4 challenge rivalry; chapters 5–10 examine bodies, relationships, and freedom; chapters 11–14 address gathered worship; chapter 15 grounds hope in Christ's resurrection. Love is the governing purpose of gifts, not a decorative interlude. Christians differ over ministry roles and the continuing exercise of particular gifts, while sharing the call to edify others.

Biblical references: 1 Corinthians 1:18–31 · 1 Corinthians 12:1–14:40 · 1 Corinthians 15:1–58

Sources: primary

The cross confronts rivalry

1 Corinthians 1:1–4:21

Paul rejects identity built around admired teachers. God's wisdom appears in the crucified Christ, and Christian workers are servants accountable to God. Paul's critique of worldly wisdom is not an invitation to careless reasoning; it challenges pride that treats status or eloquence as the measure of spiritual truth.

For reflection

What changes when teachers are understood as servants rather than rival sources of identity?

Holiness and the body

1 Corinthians 5:1–6:20

Paul confronts serious sexual misconduct and lawsuits among believers. Church discipline addresses the community's conduct; it does not authorize abuse or self-righteous policing of outsiders. The body matters because it belongs to Christ and is destined for resurrection. The vice list accompanies a reminder of cleansing and grace, not a license to demean people.

For reflection

How does belonging to Christ change Paul's account of freedom and bodily responsibility?

Marriage, singleness, and calling

1 Corinthians 7:1–40

Paul answers questions about marriage, sexual responsibility, separation, and singleness. He values unmarried service without making marriage inferior and addresses spouses as having mutual obligations. Distinguish his reference to Jesus' teaching from his apostolic judgments about particular circumstances. His counsel about slavery reflects an existing coercive institution, not an ideal for human relationships.

For reflection

Which advice responds to a particular circumstance, and what recurring concern guides Paul's counsel?

Freedom that seeks another's good

1 Corinthians 8:1–10:33

Knowledge about idols does not settle what love requires at a shared table. Paul limits his own rights, warns through Israel's wilderness story, and distinguishes marketplace food from participation in idolatrous worship. The mature use of freedom seeks another person's good without making every fear the final rule.

For reflection

How does Paul distinguish an ordinary meal from participation in worship, and why does a neighbor's conscience matter?

Honor and the Lord's Supper

1 Corinthians 11:1–34

Paul addresses women praying and prophesying before confronting a meal where wealth divides the church. Details of head coverings are debated, but his account includes mutual dependence in the Lord. At the Supper, remembrance of Christ cannot be separated from recognizing and caring for the gathered body.

For reflection

How do social privilege and disregard for others contradict what the Lord's Supper proclaims?

One body, many gifts, one purpose

1 Corinthians 12:1–14:40

The Spirit gives varied gifts for shared benefit; love makes their use meaningful. Understandable speech and orderly participation matter more than spiritual display. Read the instructions about women in 14:34–35 alongside 11:5; Christians disagree over their scope and application. Acknowledge that debate while following the clear call to build up the church.

For reflection

Which practices make another person’s understanding and participation easier rather than showcasing the speaker?

Resurrection makes faithful work matter

1 Corinthians 15:1–16:24

Paul recalls the received proclamation of Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and appearances, then argues for the future resurrection of believers. A spiritual body is a body transformed by God's Spirit, not the denial of embodied life. The final collection and travel instructions connect this future hope with ordinary faithfulness.

For reflection

Why does Paul end his resurrection argument with encouragement about present work rather than escape from the world?

Sources

- [primary] 1 Corinthians; primary biblical text. Reading references only; no Bible text is reproduced in this resource. <https://ebible.org/eng-web/1CO.htm>
- [brown] Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Doubleday, 1997), chapter 22. Background and scholarly discussion; not an endorsement of every interpretation in this study.

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