

## **1 Corinthians: The Church in a Secular Culture**

### **Introduction**

Imagine a small group of new Christians in an urban center, struggling to live the Christian life. These Christians are like an island battered by a stormy sea of immoral living. They have come from all sorts of backgrounds. Some of them have been involved in the grossest forms of human behavior.

A few years before, a person named Paul had come to them proclaiming the good news that they could rise above the despair and debauchery of their world through the power of God. Unlike the gods whom they had heard about before, this God had entered directly into human history. In fact, this God had come to live on earth for a brief period of time a few decades before in a man named Jesus.

This Jesus had taught the way of life and given himself sacrificially in death. Moreover, somehow the meaning of Jesus' death extended to them, making them sense both their need and God's grace. Even more, this Jesus had been resurrected from the dead! This unbelievable but true event assured them that God would raise them to life after their death, too. The small group had been bonded together by the meaning and hope they had found in Jesus.

Then Paul had gone away. Uncertainty began to develop within the group, and people who had come into the group from various backgrounds began to try to answer the group's questions and to say what they thought Paul had really meant when he had said thus and so. Some people began to return to the patterns of life they had known in the past. They brought the kind of life they had known on the streets of Corinth into the life of the group. The consensus of the group was that living in such a manner was no problem now that they had become so spiritual. Furthermore, bickering and disharmony developed in the group as people claimed to believe first this and then that. They formed cliques and parties based on what they thought they believed various human leaders—Paul, Apollos, Peter—had taught. Some even declared themselves to be above it all. They claimed that they simply followed Christ, looking down their first-century noses at the others.

Finally, someone suggested that they should write Paul and ask him about the questions that were being raised. So they did, although the vote was far from unanimous. Perhaps the people who brought the letter to Paul—"Chloe's people"—also brought further news about what was really happening in the congregation (1 Corinthians 1:11).

So Paul wrote the Corinthian Christians. Likely the time was the mid-50s AD. Paul had established the church in Corinth on what we call his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-18), probably about AD 49. Paul then had spent eighteen months in Corinth, instructing the church. Then he had gone away on further missionary work. When Paul was away, the problems described and dealt with in 1 Corinthians developed.

The letter that we know as 1 Corinthians likely was at least Paul's second actual letter to the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 5:9), but it is the first letter we have. It contains Paul's answers to the Corinthian Christians' questions and his instructions about the problems about which he had received word.

First Corinthians is a firecracker of a letter. No, it's a dynamite stick of a letter. Because the problems of the Corinthians were explosive, so also is Paul's letter explosive. What can we do about that? Since 1 Corinthians is part of Holy Scripture, we can do nothing except try to understand it and how it may apply to us.

We do well to beware of coming too readily to a quick application to our lives of Paul's instructions to the church at Corinth, however. Paul directed his guidance to that church in that setting in that day.

One of the causes of our perplexity and confusion about the teachings in 1 Corinthians is that Paul's letter provides only one side of the dialogue. From Paul's end of the conversation, we know that reports of divisions (1:10), sexual immorality (5:1), and evidently disbelief in Christ's resurrection (15:12) had come to Paul. Furthermore, we know that the Corinthians asked Paul specific questions about certain issues—marriage (7:1,25), eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols (8:1), the nature of spiritual gifts (12:1), and "the collection for the saints" (16:1, NRSV). Paul may have had more in mind in writing this letter, but at least these items provide an index for the major issues about which Paul wrote.

We can only guess the exact circumstances related to each of these issues, however. As Kenneth Chafin wrote about seeking to understand and apply this letter, "What makes this difficult is that Paul intended for everything he said to apply to the Corinthians. He did not label for us that which was related only to local culture and circumstance."<sup>1</sup> That reality calls for humility as we seek to understand and apply to our lives Paul's guidance to the church at Corinth.

In our cultural setting, far removed from first-century Corinth, Paul's instructions to the Corinthian Christians are difficult to understand at points. We recall that Peter, too, said he found some of Paul's writings "hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:15-16)! Even so, we do well to avoid rejecting Paul's instructions as if they do not apply to us in any way. As we study 1 Corinthians, we will find connections to us and our needs and problems. Consider the major topics on which Paul instructed the Corinthian Christians:

Dealing with division in the church

Overcoming division through focusing on the cross of Christ

Becoming spiritually mature Christians

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth L. Chafin, 1, 2 Corinthians, The Communicator's Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1985), 17.

Getting the right perspective on church leaders—and church leaders getting the right perspective on themselves

Correcting members' out-of-bounds behavior

Maintaining healthy marriages and affirming singleness

Deciding what to do about life's gray (less than clear) areas

Being Christian witnesses in regard to the practices of one's society, particularly in how women conduct themselves

Demonstrating genuine Christian community

Understanding, identifying, and using spiritual gifts appropriately and well

Letting our lives be guided by God's kind of love

Using the best ways of communicating the gospel

Emphasizing the power of God in overcoming we human beings' greatest anxiety—the knowledge that we will die

Our task is to seek to understand how Paul's instructions to the Corinthian church apply to us and to do so with the greatest courage we can in looking at our own practices. One way of approaching the letter is to ask ourselves how Paul might have stated these instructions for us, particularly the principles behind them.