

1 Corinthians

Student Copy

Providence Baptist Church

1773 Hawthorne Avenue

College Park, Georgia 30337

www.providencebc.com

(404)209-1423

Charles E. Nesbitt, Jr., Pastor

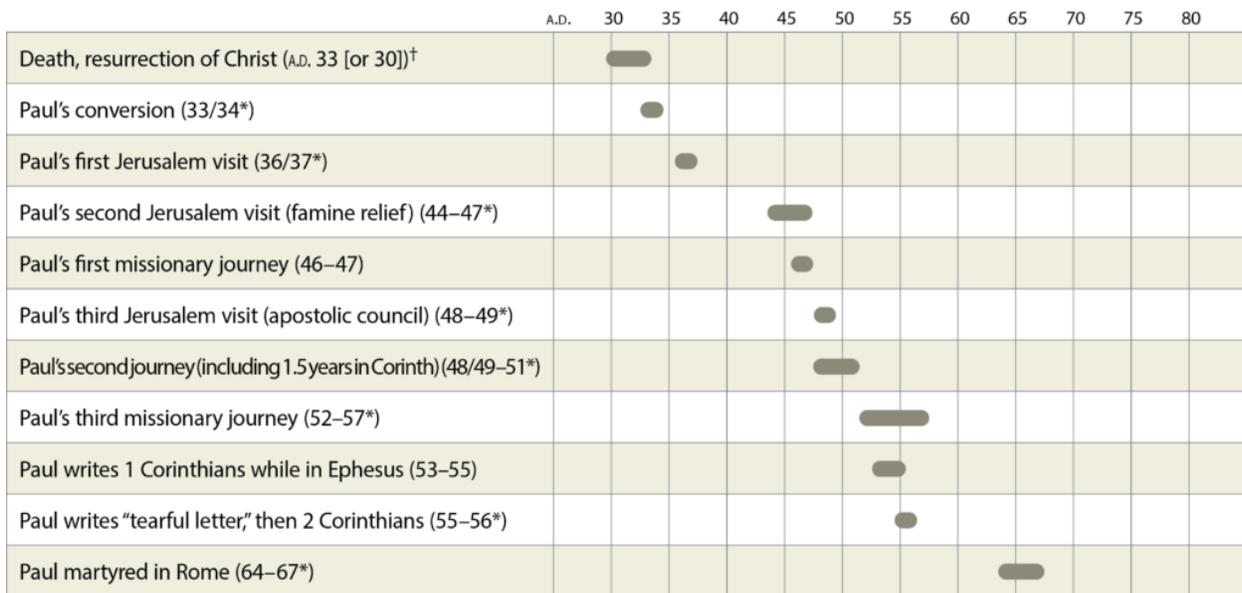
Author & Date

Author

The first word of 1 Corinthians states that Paul is its author. There is no good reason to doubt this. The theological concerns of the letter, the energy of its style, its vocabulary, and its historical connections with the other Pauline letters and Acts mark it as Pauline. The traditional title of the letter means that it is the first of two canonical letters by Paul to the Corinthians, not that it was Paul's first letter to them (see [1 Cor. 5:9](#)).

Date

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from the city of Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia ([1 Cor. 16:8, 19](#)) sometime before the final day of Pentecost ([1 Cor. 16:8](#); cf. [Lev. 23:11, 15](#)), and therefore in the spring. It is unclear whether this was the spring of A.D. 53, 54, or 55. He wrote, in any case, near the end of his three-year ministry in Ephesus ([1 Cor. 16:5–9](#); cf. Acts 19:21–22).



* denotes approximate date; / signifies either/or; † see *The Date of Jesus' Crucifixion*, pp. 1809–1810

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Genre

First Corinthians is a pastoral letter to a spiritually troubled church. Like other NT Epistles, it is an “occasional” letter, and one can quite readily piece together the things that occasioned 1 Corinthians by noting signals in the text. The letter is highly relevant today, as it deals with such issues as the relationship between Christians and their surrounding pagan culture, divisions within the church, the ordering of church practices such as the Lord’s Supper, and the use of spiritual gifts. The letter also deals with matters of personal morality, such as sex, marriage, celibacy, and the virtues (esp. love).

First Corinthians follows the form of a typical first-century epistle, though its content is governed by the specific situation in the Corinthian church. For example, the usual epistolary elements of salutation, thanksgiving, and paraenesis (set of moral exhortations) receive scant treatment. The body of the letter is taken up with situations and questions from the Corinthian church that Paul addresses, and the epistolary close (Ch. 16) is extensive because of business Paul has with the church. The rhetorical modes of exhortation and instruction dominate the letter. Chapter 13 is an encomium (a written tribute) in praise of love.

The book makes extensive use of rhetorical techniques such as contrast, repetition, and analogy. It draws sharp contrasts between truth and error, and between moral good and evil. Because Paul regards the Corinthian Christians as being out of line in a number of areas, the letter exhibits a strong corrective tone.

Setting

The Acrocorinth is a small but steep mountain 1,886 feet (575 m) high on the Peloponnesian peninsula in southern Greece. Ancient Corinth was built at the mountain’s foot, benefiting also from the natural spring that provided water for the town. In Paul’s day Corinth, though a couple of miles inland, oversaw the territory connecting the Adriatic port of Lechaion on the west with the Aegean port of Cenchreae to the east (see [Acts 18:18](#)). Ships were often portaged between these seaports across this narrow stretch of the Peloponnesian isthmus, approximately 3.7 miles (6 km) wide at its narrowest. Several rulers in the first century A.D. foolishly attempted to construct a canal across the isthmus, but this was not successfully accomplished until the nineteenth century.

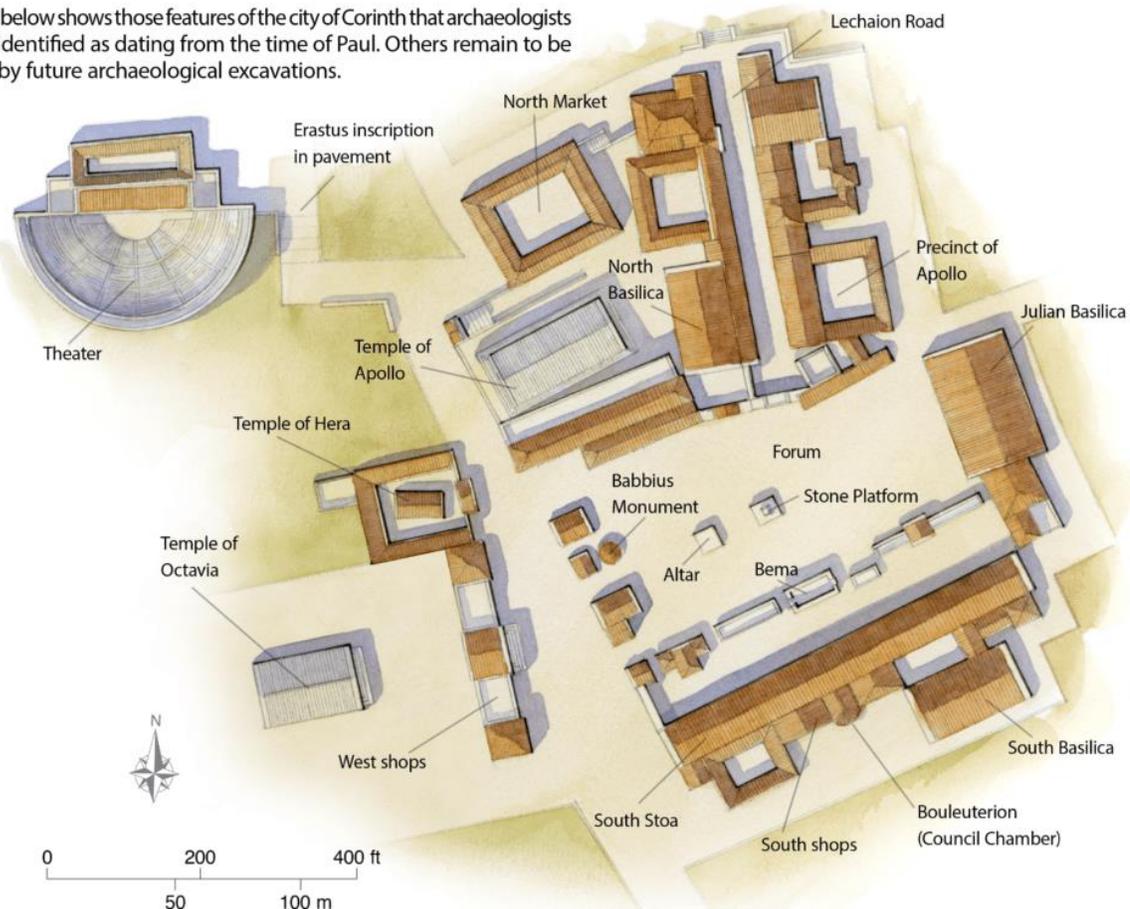
The famed Greek city of Corinth, renowned for its artistry in bronze, its wealth, and its wanton sexuality, was destroyed in 146 B.C. during a war with Rome. The city was re-founded as a Roman colony in 44 B.C. by Roman freedmen, and the distinct archaeological strata in the city center testify to this gap in its history. Inscriptions from the first hundred years of the new

colony were mostly in Latin, although strong marks of Greek culture were also evident in the art and life of the city.

First-century Corinth followed a Roman city plan based on a rectangular grid. Typical urban structures were built (or reconstructed), such as shops, stoas, basilicas, a bouleterion (for the city council meetings), a gymnasium, baths, latrines, and a theater. A few large houses from this period have also been excavated. The center of town boasted the refashioned Peirene Fountain as a pleasant place from which to draw spring water. To this day a raised speaker's platform stands in the main forum, and a nearby inscription refers to this platform as the *rostra* (equivalent to a *bēma* or tribunal); this is probably the very location where Gallio judged Paul to be innocent ([Acts 18:12–17](#)). Some other significant archaeological remains date from post-NT times, such as the odeion (a small covered theater).

CORINTH IN THE TIME OF PAUL (C. A.D. 60)

The city plan below shows those features of the city of Corinth that archaeologists have so far identified as dating from the time of Paul. Others remain to be discovered by future archaeological excavations.



In Paul's day the great Doric-style temple (to Athena or Apollo) from the sixth century B.C. remained a central feature in Corinth, and multiple temples to other deities dotted the city. Indeed, when the author Pausanias wrote about Corinth in the mid-second

century A.D., his description of the city read like a tour guide of pagan monumental sacred sites. Corinth boasted an important sanctuary of Asklepios (the god of healing), where people would come to offer sacrifices to the god and to seek medical care. Marks of the imperial cult were evident, especially if some are correct in identifying the substantial Temple E as being dedicated to Augustus's sister Octavia (though it may have been for Jupiter). The famous Hellenistic-era temple of Aphrodite atop the Acrocorinth had been rebuilt as a rather small structure during the first-century A.D. Scholars debate whether Strabo's first-century A.D. account of 1,000 temple prostitutes refers to the earlier Hellenistic temple of Aphrodite or to the Roman one of Paul's day; the former seems more probable (Strabo, *Geography* 8.6.20c; see also Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 13.573c–574c). In any case, in Roman times wanton sexuality would have been common at such a port city.

For other important archaeological features see ESV Study Bible notes on [1 Corinthians 9:24–27](#) (Isthmian games), [1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1](#) (the meat market), [Acts 18:4](#) (synagogue and Judaism), and [Romans 16:23](#) (Erastus inscription).



The Setting of 1 Corinthians
c. A.D. 53–55

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians during his third missionary journey, near the end of his three-year ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:21–22). Both Corinth and Ephesus were wealthy port cities steeped in pagan idolatry and philosophy. Corinth benefited both militarily and economically from its strategic location at one end of the isthmus that connected the southern Greek peninsula to the mainland.

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Background

Corinth sat on the isthmus connecting the Greek mainland with the Peloponnesian peninsula. This location made it a flourishing crossroads for sea traffic between the Aegean region and the western Mediterranean. It was a place where many cultures and religions mingled. Since it was a Roman colony, Roman law and customs were important, particularly among the upper classes, but “many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’ ” found a home in Corinth ([1 Cor. 8:5](#)). The worship of these gods was fully integrated into governmental affairs, civic festivals, trade guilds, and social clubs, and everyday life in general. Corinth was also a destination for traveling professional orators who charged a fee for attendance at their entertaining rhetorical displays and advised people on how to advance socially.

Into this milieu Paul brought the gospel of Jesus Christ, and soon a church was established. He was aided in his work by two new-found friends from Rome, Priscilla and Aquila, who, like Paul, were displaced Jews and tentmakers by trade ([Acts 18:1–4, 18–19, 24–28](#); [Rom. 16:3](#); [2 Tim. 4:19](#)). Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila spent 18 months in Corinth in the early 50s and then, after a brief trip to Judea and Syria, Paul traveled to Ephesus. Priscilla and Aquila were already there ([Acts 18:19](#); [1 Cor. 16:19](#)) and, by the time Paul arrived, they had already met the skillful Christian apologist Apollos, who had also been in Corinth ([Acts 18:24–19:1](#); [1 Cor. 1:12](#); [3:4–6, 22](#); [4:6](#); [16:12](#)).

Paul settled in Ephesus for three years ([Acts 20:31](#)) and at some point wrote to the Corinthians the otherwise unknown letter that he mentions in 1 Corinthians 5:9. It is not known what prompted the letter but it dealt with sexual immorality, a persistent problem for the Corinthian church ([1 Cor. 5:1–13](#); [6:12–20](#)). Sometime later, Paul received an oral report indicating that the Corinthians had not only misunderstood his first letter ([1 Cor. 5:10](#)) but were plagued with serious problems of division, sexual immorality, and social snobbery ([1 Cor. 1:10](#); [5:1](#); [11:18](#)).

Around the same time, a letter arrived from the Corinthians that displayed considerable theological confusion about marriage, divorce, participation in pagan religions, order within corporate worship, and the bodily resurrection of Christians ([1 Cor. 7:1](#); [8:1](#); [12:1](#); [15:12, 35](#)).

In response to these troubling developments, Paul felt compelled to write a substantial letter to Corinth, making the case that much of their conduct was out of step with the gospel. At the root of their disunity lay an arrogance ([1 Cor. 3:21](#); [4:6, 8, 18–19](#); [5:2, 6](#)) that was incompatible with God’s free gifts to them in Christ: wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption ([1 Cor. 1:30](#); [4:7](#)). In addition, a self-centered insistence on their own rights ([1 Cor. 6:12](#); [8:9](#); [9:12](#); [10:23](#)) at the expense of the weak ([1 Cor. 8:10](#); [11:22](#)) and marginalized ([1 Cor. 14:16, 23](#)) revealed that their own social advancement rather than the gospel’s advancement was their top priority.

At the root of much of the immorality and idolatry in Corinth, moreover, lay a lack of appreciation for the holiness that God requires of his people. Though the particulars of the Mosaic law were no longer to define the boundaries for God’s people ([1 Cor. 7:19](#)), the law’s underlying theme that God’s people were to be “set apart”—a people marked off from their

culture—remained in place ([1 Cor. 5:1–2, 13; 7:19; 10:1–5](#)). In addition, the dwelling of God’s Spirit within each believer ([1 Cor. 6:19](#)) and the new unity that believers have with the resurrected, living Christ ([1 Cor. 6:14–17; 15:30–34](#)) implied that the Corinthians needed to make a clean break from the moral impurity of their culture.

Despite the often stern tone of the letter (1 Cor. 4:18–21; 5:2; 11:17, 22; 15:36), Paul was thankful to God for the Corinthians ([1 Cor. 1:8](#)) and felt a deep personal affection for them ([1 Cor. 16:24](#)). Because of this love, and for the purpose of God’s glory ([1 Cor. 10:31](#)), Paul wanted the Corinthians to become a well-constructed dwelling place for God’s Spirit ([1 Cor. 3:12, 16](#)) and to be “guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” ([1 Cor. 1:8](#)).

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Outline

Week 1	Overview and Introduction
Week 2	Speech, Knowledge, and Spiritual Gifts (1 Cor 1:1-9)
Week 3	The Issue of Disunity (1 Cor 1:10-4:21)
Week 4	Proclamation, Wisdom, and Unity (1 Cor. 1:17b-4:21)
Week 5	A Report of Sexual Immorality (1 Cor 5:1-6:20)
Week 6	Legal Cases/Trivial Cases about Unrighteous Judges (1 Cor 5:1-6:20)
Week 7	Marriage and Divorce and Unchangeable Circumstances (1 Cor 7:1-24)
Week 8	The Betrothed and Widows (1 Cor 7:25-40)
Week 9	Food and Idolatry (1 Cor 8:1-11:1)
Week 10	Head Coverings and Worship (1 Cor 1(1:2-16)
Week 11	Social Snobbery at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34)
Week 12	Elevating one Spiritual Gift above Others (1 Cor 12:1-14:40)
Week 13	The Centrality and Necessity of the Resurrection (1 Cor 15:1-58) Part 1
Week 14	The Centrality and Necessity of the Resurrection (1 Cor 15:1-58) Part 2
Week 15	The Collection for the Saint, Travel Plan, and Farewell Greetings (1 Cor 16:1-24)
Week 16	Themes – Class Report – Part 1
Week 17	Themes – Class Report – Part 2
Week 18	Summary and Conclusions

Week 1

Overview and Introduction

The apostle Paul's epistle to the Corinthian church covers many different theological and practical questions, but there is one central issue he is addressing: unity. The Corinthian church was fractured, and the chief reason was pride. This pride manifested itself in a skewed view of the gospel, which led to sinful attitudes about things such as speech and knowledge, and a misuse of their spiritual gifts.

Like many churches today, the Corinthian church was very gifted. The people were intellectually sharp; some were financially blessed. They were variously talented and had very visible and powerful gifts from the Holy Spirit. Yet those gifts were not submitted to the greatest of the Spirit's purposes in human lives—namely love. Paul argues throughout this letter that Christ-exalting, cross-defined love must replace the puffed-up pride that coursed through this church. In fact, a key principle in 1 Corinthians is that giftedness without character leads to bondage and sin, not freedom and redemption.

At the heart of this book is the reality of the cross and resurrection. Paul admonishes this church to return to the logic and pattern of the gospel, so that pride is replaced with servant-hearted love and unity.

Placing It in the Larger Story

First Corinthians is one of Paul's letters to a first-century church in ancient Corinth. Jesus had completed his earthly ministry, had died on a cross for the sins of the world, had been raised from the dead in fulfillment and victory, and had returned to his Father in heaven. The Spirit had been given in full at Pentecost, and the church had begun to grow throughout Asia Minor, with both Jews and Gentiles being brought in. This letter is one of many epistles written to local churches that were growing and wrestling with what it means to be faithful communities of Christ's followers. Each church had unique questions and struggles, and the church at Corinth was no exception. This letter addresses a fundamental and ongoing issue for any local church: How does the gospel unite God's people in humility and love?

Memory Verse for the course

“So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” ([1 Cor. 13:13](#))

1. What is your understanding of how 1 Corinthians helps us to grasp the identity and role of Christ's church?
2. What in your view does 1 Corinthians uniquely contribute, theologically and practically, to our understanding of a truly Spirit-filled, faithful local church, as well as the Spirit-filled life of the individual believer?
3. What aspects of 1 Corinthians have confused you? Are there any specific questions about church life and personal discipleship that you hope to have answered through this study?
4. From your understanding what caused the Corinthian church to fall into such disarray?
5. What clues can we gather about this from the first part of Paul's letter?
6. What are some of the typical root problems that cause a church to become "defiled"?

Week 2

Speech, Knowledge, and Spiritual Gifts (1 Cor 1:1-9)

The Place of the Passage

Paul begins this letter in classic form, with initial greetings and a highlighting of the issues that will arise as key themes throughout the letter, including the theme of unity. Paul identifies himself and his intended audience, and portrays the Corinthian church as those sanctified in Jesus and in fellowship with all the saints who call upon the name of the Lord ([1 Cor. 1:2](#)). Paul then shifts to words of thanksgiving as he addresses three key themes in the letter: speech, knowledge, and spiritual gifts ([1 Cor. 1:5-7](#)). This initial greeting is sincere, but also pointed. Paul uses it as a means to point to the grace and salvation the Corinthian believers possess, yet also as a means to exhort them toward obedience in areas where they are clearly walking in sin.

The Big Picture

In [1 Corinthians 1:1-9](#), Paul reveals that God's people are first and foremost defined by the peace and grace given to them through Jesus, which in turn is a basis and mandate for their sanctification.

1. Look up the following 3 words: **Apostle** and **Sanctification** and **Epistle**. They should help you in your study of this lesson.

Sanctification:

Apostle:

Epistle:

2. Paul begins by identifying himself and Sosthenes. What does it mean that Paul was "called" as an apostle? Why is it important that he mentions this?

3. We don't know much about Sosthenes ([Acts 18:12-17](#)) may be describing the same man), but why might it be significant that Paul mentions this ministry partner? How does partnership in ministry help frame the main idea of unity in this letter?

4. Several key terms such as sanctified, called, saints, grace, and peace are introduced by Paul. How do these terms set the stage for what is to come (feel free to read the next section to get the context)?

5. In a first-century secular letter, an introductory blessing would often be, "Peace and health." Notice that Paul says, "Grace and peace." How is that significant?

6. Speech, knowledge, and spiritual gifts arise as three key themes here, in preparation for and anticipation of the rest of the letter. Notice how Paul comments on each in [1 Corinthians 1:5-7](#). Is Paul condemning the existence of these three realities in the lives of the Corinthians? If not, how is he shaping their view of each reality?

7. What is the greater reality to which Paul is calling these Christians at the end of [1 Corinthians 1:7](#)? How does that set the perspective the Corinthians should have toward their blessings and talents?

Week 3

The Issue of Disunity (1 Cor 1:10-17a)

[First Corinthians 1:10–4:21](#) is the larger unit that explores the presenting issue of divisions over loyalty to different Christian preachers. Our first subunit is [1 Corinthians 1:10–17a](#), wherein Paul declares how unity is being compromised in the Corinthian church. He says that it has been reported to him that “there is quarreling among you, my brothers” ([1 Cor. 1:11b](#)). Specifically, there are factions in the church, aligned along loyalty lines toward certain well-known preachers, such as Paul, Cephas (Peter), Apollos, and even Christ himself. A theme of identification emerges in this paragraph: The kind of leaders with whom we identify can have a significant impact on our sense of unity. A divided church reveals that it has removed its focus from the gospel and thus has become bereft of “the same mind and the same judgment” ([1 Cor. 1:10](#)). Here, the theme of gospel proclamation, and what it actually is, is introduced (see [1 Corinthians 2–3](#)).

The Big Picture

[First Corinthians 1:10–17a](#) shows that the Corinthian church was clearly disunited and quarreling, as a spirit of competitiveness had crept in, ironically finding expression in loyalty toward various Christian preachers.

1. What is the connection between loyalty to Christian leaders, especially inspiring ones, and potential disunity?
2. Look at the way Paul rhetorically phrases this problem in the Corinthian church in [1 Cor. 1:12](#). How does that phraseology help identify how human loyalty and potential disunity can go hand in hand?
3. Paul appeals to the Corinthians in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Why is the name of Jesus not merely a formula of authority, but also a theologically important reality to bring up at this point?

4. Paul urges the Corinthians to agree together, to be united in the same mind, and even to have the same judgment. Is Paul commanding this church to have absolute uniformity of opinion and belief?

5. If not, what does he mean by such vivid terminology?

6. Paul asks the Corinthians, “Is Christ divided?” ([1 Cor. 1:13](#)). What does he mean by that, given the context?

7. Why did Paul ask the questions in 1 Corinthians 1:20-25?

8. What do the answers reveal about the church?

9. What are some of the causes of division in the church today?

10. Paul then evokes the images of crucifixion and baptism. How do those in turn relate to the presenting issue of divisions over Christian preachers? What is it about those two issues that gets at the heart of unity?

Week 4

Proclamation, Wisdom, and Unity (1 Cor. 1:17b-4:21)

The Place of the Passage

Paul embarks on perhaps the most theologically and pastorally important section of the letter. [First Corinthians 1:17b–4:21](#) is the anchor of the epistle. The problem of disunity has been reported, and now the spiritual causes are named. This, in turn, sets the stage for the answer to the problem to be named, as well. The problem is the wisdom of the world. The answer is the wisdom of God. Paul turns human and worldly sensibility on its head in several distinct areas in these verses. He essentially calls the Corinthians “backward” in their manner of approaching reality. The Corinthians have been taking their cues from the culture around them, and it is now time for them to take their cues from the logic of the gospel, not least the reality of the cross. This section highlights the purpose of preaching, the role of the Christian leader, the issue of true power, and the place of suffering—not ease—in gospel ministry.

The Big Picture

In [1 Corinthians 1:17b–4:21](#) Paul exhorts the people of God to reclaim true Christian unity by embracing Christ crucified as the solution to their quarreling and competitiveness, because Christ crucified is the logic of all of spiritual life.

1. Human wisdom is about strength found in this world, about power advantage, about prestige, and about looking good in front of others. How does Paul unsettle these notions? Look at [Isaiah 29:14](#), quoted in [1 Corinthians 1:19](#). How does the context of Isaiah and that quote support Paul’s point?

2. A key historical background key to a better understanding of the Corinthian situation and Paul’s response is the Greco-Roman valuation of rhetoric. Ancient rhetoricians were professional traveling speakers who thrilled crowds with their use of words. Their purpose was to persuade a crowd toward a viewpoint. The viewpoint was not crucial

per se, but rather the persuading itself was the point. These speakers used words in such a way as to delight and move their audience. The power was in the words and human giftedness. The rhetorician did not even necessarily need to believe the viewpoint he was advocating. How is Paul contradicting all of this? How was Paul's self-conception different (see [1 Cor. 1:18–2:5](#))?

3. If Paul is not a typical rhetorician, and his aim is to convey a message about Jesus and the cross, then he must be more akin to a prophet or herald. Given what we learn in [1 Corinthians 1:17b–2:16](#), what is the job description of the faithful herald of the gospel?

4. How does Paul define true wisdom? How is the cross essential to the argument and profoundly evocative of true wisdom?

5. Given the argument of [1 Corinthians 1:17b–2:16](#), how then should the Corinthians view people like Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), or any other gifted preacher or leader?

6. How should true wisdom shape the self-conception of preachers, both in the ancient world and today? Is the use of elocution or rhetoric inherently wrong? If not, how can we use various communication techniques without contradicting the gospel?

7. In this section, we see that human weakness highlights the power of the Spirit in true gospel proclamation. Paul then redefines the ministerial life of apostolic preaching as one not of ease and continual blessing, but of suffering and hardship. How does he describe the true life and ministry of the apostles ([1 Cor. 4:8–4:13](#))? What are some of the implications of this for gospel ministry today? How does this encourage and fuel steadfastness in ministry?

8. In [1 Corinthians 4:4–5](#), Paul describes a clear conscience. He is being accused of lacking true apostolic status because of his suffering. His whole argument turns the tables on such thinking. How does his teaching encourage the suffering pastor, especially one being falsely accused?

Week 5

A Report of Sexual Immorality (1 Cor 5:1-13)

The Place of the Passage

Paul has established the theological underpinning of true unity in [1 Corinthians 1–4](#). Now he begins an extensive treatment on specific lifestyle issues that are ways in which the Corinthians' current disunity is being expressed. Many of these issues have been reported to Paul, and many may have been posed to Paul in a former letter that has been lost to history. One by one, Paul begins to address these issues, applying the gospel to each circumstance while also giving specific principles and action points. In our immediate section, [1 Corinthians 5:1–6:20](#), Paul focuses on an issue of sexual immorality, which involves the principle of the purity of the church, as well as the issue of how local churches should treat legal cases. The issue of adjudicating conflict and immorality in the church in a godly manner is prominent. [1 Corinthians 5–6](#), like the larger section of which they are a part ([1 Corinthians 5–14](#)), are consistently practical and quite applicable to the church today.

The Big Picture

[First Corinthians 5:1–6:20](#) teaches that the church must maintain its purity in terms of sexuality and in how it deals with strife. In each case, the reality of the church as the body of Christ, holy and Spirit-filled, is the defining vision.

1. Paul says that his judgment with regard to a man living in sexual sin with his father's wife (i.e., his stepmother) is true and authoritative in that his spirit—along with the power and the name of Jesus—are authoritative pronouncements in this case of incest ([1 Cor. 5:3–5](#)). Do pastors or other Christians have that kind of authority today? If not, what basis does the church have for church discipline?
2. What is at stake in church discipline, according to Paul? When someone comes under church discipline and has to be excommunicated, what is the purpose of that excommunication?

3. Why is church discipline such a touchy subject for churches today? What are the greatest challenges facing a church that needs to be disciplined for inappropriate behavior or teaching? Whose responsibility is it to speak out when a church is getting off track?

4. Review Leviticus 18:6-8; 20:11. What do these passages tell us about the sin in question? Why didn't Paul pass judgment on the woman in this story?

5. How did Paul go about directing the church to deal with the sin? What does it mean to deliver a Christian "unto Satan"? By what authority is sin dealt with in the church? Why is it so important not to treat church members' behavior lightly or carelessly?

6. How is the way the media deal with scandal and public sin like and unlike the way the church deals with it? What is it about someone else's sins that makes the subject so tempting to share with others? What are healthy ways for the church to deal with members who are in obvious sin? What about those who are rumored to be in sin? Why is this such a touchy subject for churches to deal with?

Week 6

Legal Cases /Trivial Cases About Unrighteous Judges (1 Cor 6:1-20)

The Place of the Passage

The church at Corinth was rapidly losing its testimony in the city. Not only did the unsaved know about the immorality in the assembly, but they were also aware of the lawsuits involving members of the church. Not only were there sins of the flesh, but also sins of the spirit (2 Cor. 7:1). Paul detected three tragedies in this situation. First, the believers were presenting a poor testimony to the lost. Second, the congregation had failed to live up to its full position in Christ. There was a third tragedy: The members suing each other had already lost. Even if some of them won their cases, they had incurred a far greater loss in their disobedience to the Word of God.

1. There seem to be cases of fraud and property rights violations within the Corinthian church community, and some of the believers are suing each other in the secular court system. What theological reasons does Paul give here for why believers should adjudicate such matters within the church rather than in civil courts?
2. Does this section mean that believers should never use secular courts? If there is room for believers to use secular courts, how might the principles in this text be used to create a godly process?
3. [First Corinthians 6:9–11](#) is a transitional section, coming off of [1 Corinthians 6:1–8](#) and anticipating the themes of [1 Corinthians 6:12–20](#). Paul reminds the church members that unrighteous people will not inherit the kingdom of God; they are not members of the kingdom, nor will they share in its eternal reward. Paul then lists several sinful lifestyles characteristic of the unrighteous person. Does this list suggest that anyone who struggles with such things will not be received by Jesus and have entrance into heaven? Explain.

4. What verse in this passage teaches that simply struggling with such sins does not cut us off from grace? So, how would you characterize the person represented in [1 Corinthians 6:9–10](#)?

5. In [1 Corinthians 6:12](#), as in [1 Corinthians 10:23](#), Paul seems to be quoting a well-known slogan on permissibility: “All things are lawful for me.” Paul then counters with his own statement that “not all things are helpful.” The point is that the gospel does not give free permission to live in sin. Paul then gives a theologically rich vision of the body. How does he describe the human body in terms of Jesus? The Spirits? The temple? The resurrection also factors into Paul’s teaching. How?

6. In [1 Corinthians 6:18](#), Paul teaches that—contrary to much popular teaching today—sexual sin is not just like any other sins. How is it that sexual sin is “against” the body while other sins are “outside” the body?

Week 7

Marriage and Divorce and Unchangeable Circumstances

(1 Cor 7:1-24)

The Place of the Passage

[First Corinthians 7:1–40](#) continues an extended discussion of practical Christian living, now in response to questions previously submitted in a letter to Paul ([1 Cor. 7:1](#)). It is part of a larger section, [1 Corinthians 7:1–11:1](#), which handles several overriding issues of marriage, divorce, singleness, food offered to idols, and other matters of Christian identity and lifestyle. The historical background is that of a Gentile Christian church, whose members formerly lived as pagans did. Their view of marriage, sexuality, singleness, divorce, and children, and their former status in terms of ethnicity, vocation, and paganism comes into play. Thus, another key question Paul responds to is, what changed when I became a Christian, and what does that mean for what stays the same and what needs to be left behind?

The Big Picture

[First Corinthians 7:1–40](#) teaches that our identity is most fundamentally in Christ, rather than in our circumstances of marriage, singleness, vocation, and ethnicity.

1. Why is it important to note that Paul was responding to specific questions and not outlining an entire theology about marriage?
2. What sort of misinterpretation could result from considering the message in 1 Corinthians as a complete theology?

3. Consider: Review 1 Corinthians 7:6, 10, 12, and 25. Why might some readers believe he was disclaiming divine inspiration for this content?

4. Divorce is a controversial topic. It is never a good thing, but Paul gives some conditions for divorce here. Look up some of the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels on this topic ([Matt. 5:32; 19:9](#); [Mark 10:11–12](#); [Luke 16:18](#)). How does Paul add to or further explain the conditions for divorce?

5. Paul is not teaching that one should begin an ungodly lifestyle, or enter into a status not pleasing to God, after conversion. But he is teaching that, if one is converted while living in a circumstance that is not ideal yet is redeemable—such as marriage to an unbeliever, or slavery—one does not necessarily need to change that status. How do we know what kinds of life patterns must be repented of by new believers, and what kinds may be allowed to continue, even though they are less than God’s ideal for us?

6. Review 1 Corinthians 7:1-11. What is the core question Paul addressed in these verses? How does this passage tie in with Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19:10-12? In what ways does Genesis 2:18 play into this discussion?

Week 8

The Betrothed and Widows (1 Cor 7:25-40)

The Place of the Passage

Marriage was a blessing in Old Testament times, while singleness and barrenness were a curse. The book of Ruth shows this reality. But with the coming of Christ and the establishment of his kingdom, while marriage and procreation are still a means of multiplying God's people, this happens even more essentially through evangelization and discipleship. Paul can, therefore, commend singleness not only as an option but as a preferable one, for single people can be free to give their full devotion to God and his kingdom.

1. Paul speaks of the "present distress" ([1 Cor. 7:26](#)). How does Paul envision the days in which the Corinthian church lived? Look at texts such as [1 Thessalonians 5:1-9](#) to help you understand Paul's views on the final days. Also, read Jesus' teaching in [Matthew 24:36-51](#), [Mark 13:32-37](#), and [Luke 17:26-30](#).
2. What reasons does Paul give for choosing to remain unmarried? Do these reasons square with the reasons many young people today choose to avoid or delay marriage?
3. If married, is it impossible to be single-minded about the Lord? If it is possible, how specifically might married people be fully committed to their spouse and yet live with gospel urgency in these final days?

4. In the Old Testament, singleness was a curse. In fact, for a woman to be single (and thus unable to have children) was for her to be in an “afflicted” status (e.g., [1 Sam. 1:11](#)). What has changed in the new covenant? Is there any notion in the New Testament that marriage and procreation have been lowered in status?

5. How did Paul apply the principle stated in 1 Cor 7:1 to single believers and widows in 7:8-9? Do you believe the argument Paul gave: “If you can’t control yourself” is a good reason to marry? Why or why not? What is the deeper spiritual truth being championed here?

6. Why do you think marriage has become such a contentious subject in our world today?

7. What is it about the Bible’s definition of marriage that troubles so many other people? Should the state governments give in to these pressures? What is lost by doing this? Is anything gained? How are Christians to respond when marriage is redefined in the courts?

Week 9

Food and Idolatry (1 Cor 8:1-11:1)

The Place of the Passage

Although [1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1](#) is a subsection of three issues raised in a previous letter to which Paul is now responding ([1 Cor. 7:1–11:1](#)), it is a lengthy response and deserves its own chapter in our study. The presenting issue of this passage is how Christians ought to handle meat that has been sacrificed to idols in pagan religious services. The underlying principle is that Christians should use their freedoms and rights to the advantage of others, not themselves. While Paul teaches that meat sacrificed to an idol is not inherently tainted, he also teaches that participating in an actual pagan temple ceremony is sinful ([1 Cor. 10:6–22](#)). Therefore, there are important moral differences among various situations. Some situations are open to various applications while others involve clearer moral issues.

The Big Picture

[1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1](#) unpacks how God-honoring decisions need to be made in controversial situations that require the balance of biblical freedom, cultural awareness, and love for other believers.

1. Paul shifts the focus in the question-and-answer section of 1 Corinthians to the issue of meat sacrificed to idols ([1 Cor. 8:1](#)). “Knowledge” is a key word in this chapter. How does our knowledge of the effect of our decisions on other Christians impinge on our choices?
2. If there is only one true God, why is the issue of idol worship so powerful in the Corinthian context? What are some contemporary issues similar to the issue of meat sacrificed to idols in New Testament times?

3. What does it mean for the Corinthians to be Paul's "workmanship" and the "seal" of his apostleship in the Lord ([1 Cor. 9:1-2](#))? If Paul is an apostle and therefore has the rights of authority and is entitled to many benefits, why does he give up those rights?

4. In [1 Corinthians 9:16](#), Paul speaks of boasting. In what way is this kind of boasting commendable? If we should give up certain earthly rewards for the sake of ministry, what is the true reward we await ([1 Cor. 9:18](#))?

5. [First Corinthians 9:19-23](#) is cited often in relation to doing missionary ministry in such a way that we adapt appropriately to our host culture, a process called contextualization. What are some lines that believers should never cross in our desire to contextualize to a host culture? In [1 Corinthians 9:24-27](#), how do the athletic images Paul portrays help us understand what our attitude should be in the use of rights, sacrifice, and ministry?

6. Paul's tone shifts as he forbids participation in meals that are actually part of a pagan worship ceremony ([1 Cor. 10:7](#)). How does this context change the situation, making it more clear-cut morally?

7. What is the Old Testament narrative Paul uses as a primary theological grid to explain his point in [1 Corinthians 10:1-13](#)? How might the Corinthians be playing with fire, so to speak, by using their "freedom" to actually sit and eat amid a pagan ceremony?

Week 10

Head Coverings and Worship (1 Cor 11:2-16)

The Place of the Passage

Having addressed some practical ethical matters, Paul now turns his attention to three areas in which the Corinthian church is not living according to God's will regarding gathered worship. The issue of immediate concern in our passage is head coverings in worship, and yet the fundamental issue is really about how God's glory is expressed through the visible department of husbands and wives in the public worship gatherings of a local church, which in turn reflects the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. The letter's three primary themes of speech, knowledge, and spiritual gifts become more prominent throughout these chapters. At first glance, the issue of head coverings does not seem very relevant to the church in our day, but this is a good example of how to recognize and distinguish between abiding theological principles and mere culturally bound applications.

The Big Picture

[First Corinthians 11:2-16](#) explains how the relationship between God the Father and God the Son is reflected in the department of husbands and wives within the gathered worship of a local church in the first century.

1. Paul's argument in these verses can be confusing at first. Try to carefully map out the relationships involved here—between God the Father and God the Son, and then between husbands and wives. How does Paul speak of each relationship? How does [Genesis 1](#) speak of the image of God and humanity, and how does that relate to our passage?

2. In the historical context of New Testament times, to drape a shawl or other piece of cloth over a man was to mimic how men worshiped in pagan rituals (see our previous chapter about fleeing idolatry). But for a woman to have a head covering was a sign of being married, and of being under her husband's authority. It is similar to the symbol of a wedding ring today. This helps us understand that Paul is speaking here of married couples, not of men and women in general. With that in mind, why is it important that Paul talks about husbands and wives and the nature of head coverings? What is at stake theologically in this issue?

3. How much of what Paul taught about women in the church was specific to the culture of the time and how much is universally applicable even today? Why is this a controversial topic in today's church? What does headship mean today?

4. Authority is a central idea in our passage. How does the relationship between the Father and the Son within the Trinity help us understand that individuals may have different roles, but equal worth?

5. Note that Paul begins this section by commending the Corinthians ([1 Cor. 11:2](#)). It may be that they were faithfully adhering to the external ritual of head coverings for women while not fully understanding why they should do so; or perhaps they were doing so with wrong motives. How does the contemporary church superficially carry out right worship without necessarily having the right heart or theology behind it?

6. How can we remain healthy not just in our external forms but also in our underlying motives?

Week 11

Social Snobbery at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17–34)

The Place of the Passage

Paul has just addressed the issue of head coverings in worship, and he now turns his attention to two other issues related to gathered worship: the Lord's Supper and spiritual gifts. This longer section has the theme of unity front and center, and thus is a climactic exhortation in this letter. These chapters are being kept together in this study because the theme of unity is so clear and so powerfully connected to the issues at hand—and also because this passage begins a new argument in which Paul is responding to a specific scandal reported to him. Perhaps the most fundamental section of the entire letter resides in our passage, namely, [1 Corinthians 13](#), the love chapter. One may view [1 Corinthians 13](#) as the core of our section, and of the entire letter. In this section it serves as a bridge between two chapters on the use of spiritual gifts in worship—[1 Corinthians 12](#) and [1 Corinthians 14](#).

The Big Picture

[First Corinthians 11:17–14:40](#) teaches that loving unity is paramount in the church's life, especially in the context of the Lord's Supper and in the use of spiritual gifts. The sign of love is that all things are done in proper relationship to the reality of the gospel and for the building up of other Christians.

1. The subject at hand is the Lord's Supper. It is likely that the Corinthian church assembled in a large home, and that this church was made up of financially and socially elite, as well as working-class or economically poorer believers. The Lord's Supper may have been a full meal, and as was the custom of the day, the rich would have been served first, then the poor. The rich were eating the entirety of the meal, leaving the poor with little to nothing ([1 Cor. 11:20–21](#)). How does such an action work against the very reality to which the meal is intended to point?

6. In [1 Corinthians 11:30](#), Paul speaks of physical judgments as a result of ungodly worship. How do we understand the relationship between disobedience and physical judgment (look at [1 Cor. 5:5](#) for context)?

7. Review 1 Corinthians 11:23–34. What does this passage tell us to do in order for the Lord's Supper to be a blessing and not a chastening? What attitude should we bring to the table? In what ways is the Lord's Supper an opportunity for spiritual growth?

Week 12

Elevating one Spiritual Gift above Others (1 Cor 12:1-14:40)

1. **Elevating one spiritual gift above others (1 Cor. 12:1–31 and 1 Cor. 14:1–40).** In these two chapters, what are the gifts with which the Spirit empowers believers? For what purpose?
2. In [1 Corinthians 12:12–30](#), Paul uses the metaphor of the human body to explain the reality of spiritual gifts in the church. How does that metaphor contribute to our understanding of the diversity, unity, and equality of people and their gifts? What happens if everyone wants to be a head, like the Corinthians? What happens, on the other hand, if there are only “unpresentable” parts and no “more presentable” ones ([1 Cor. 12:23–24](#))?
3. In [1 Corinthians 14](#), what is the gift that seems to be getting top billing? Why might it be tempting to elevate such a gift?
4. [First Corinthians 13](#) is so important. Consider the context; what kind of love is Paul talking about?

5. Biblical love may be defined as faithfulness in word, speech, and action, based on a promise to be kept through grace and solid character. How does this kind of love create unity? In what ways does Paul show the futility that results when there is a lack of such love?

6. In [1 Corinthians 13:12](#), Paul speaks of a “now” versus “then” timeline. To what eras of time is he referring? If he is speaking of “then” as the return of Christ, how does that help us understand whether spiritual gifts such as tongues, prophecy, and healing are relevant for Christians today? Paul concludes with the holy triad of faith, hope, and love. Consider these three virtues and explain why love is the greatest. How does the reality of heaven put faith and hope in a category subordinate to love?

Week 13

The Centrality and Necessity of the Resurrection

(1 Cor 15:1-58) Part 1

The Place of the Passage

In [1 Corinthians 15](#), Paul finally addresses a specific issue—a question probably raised by the Corinthians in their previous letter (see [1 Cor. 7:1](#)). The issue is the resurrection of the dead. This chapter is key to the whole letter, especially to Paul’s teaching in [1 Corinthians 12–14](#) on what mature and godly worship looks like, for the truth of the bodily resurrection—that of Jesus foremost, and then that of the believer as a consequence—is the basis for the entire Christian faith. Paul argues that without the resurrection there would be no hope, and the gospel would be a futile and empty message. But with the resurrection, all that he has taught—the reality of the Spirit and the unifying power of the gospel—is true and is at work in the world.

The Big Picture

1. Paul reminds the Corinthians that they have received and believed the gospel he preached ([1 Cor. 15:1, 11](#)). What does that say about their initial response to the teaching of Jesus’ resurrection? What does it say about the relationship between initial belief and ongoing faith?

2. Paul cites several sources of authority for the truth of Jesus’ bodily resurrection ([1 Cor. 15:1–8](#)). What are those sources?

3. If Paul taught the Corinthians about Jesus' death and resurrection "in accordance with the Scriptures," then he is talking about the Old Testament. What are some Old Testament texts that reflect or teach the truth of Christ's resurrection, or resurrection in general?

4. How does Paul's personal story of conversion legitimize the reality of the resurrection? What does his contrast of "in vain/not in vain" ([1 Cor. 15:2, 10](#)) contribute to his story?

5. The Corinthians may have rejected the notion of their own resurrection due to the pressure of Greco-Roman culture, which viewed the post-death experience as ranging from nonexistence to a shadowy and immaterial existence in an underworld. In particular, to an educated person, the idea of a physical and conscious afterlife was thought to be somewhat childish. The Corinthian temptation toward elitism and good breeding was at work again. How is Paul connecting Christ's resurrection to the assurance of resurrection for his disciples?

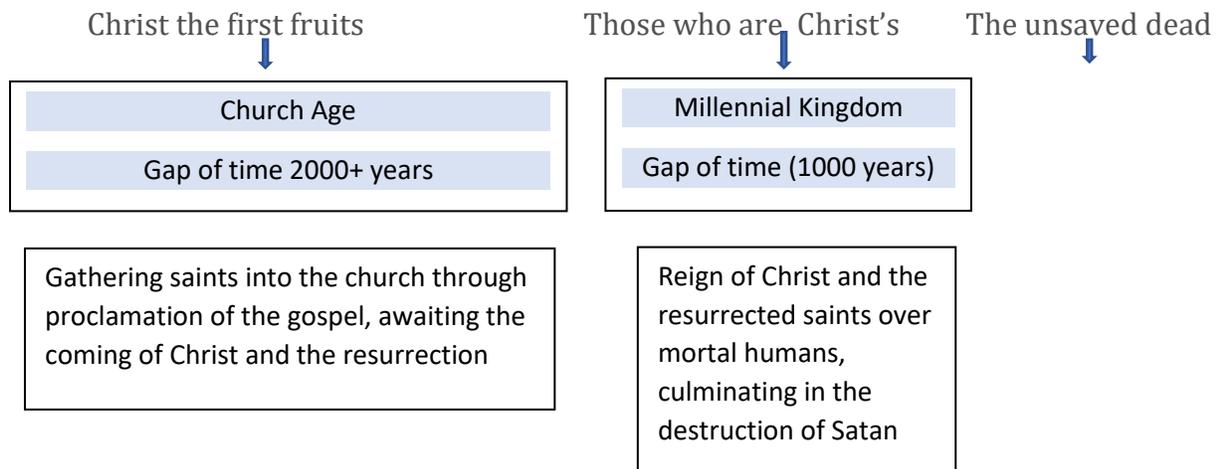
6. What does Paul mean by saying that Christ is the "first fruits" of those who have fallen asleep ([1 Cor. 15:20, 23](#))? Paul compares and contrasts Adam and Jesus. How are those two foundational biblical characters alike and how are they different, according to our passage?

Week 14

The Centrality and Necessity of the Resurrection

(1 Cor 15:1-58) Part 2

1. If God the Father and God the Son are equal, how can Paul say that Jesus will be in subjection under the Father after the final resurrection ([1 Cor. 15:28](#))?
2. What does this teach us about the relationship between the Father and the Son?
3. A few scenarios that are mentioned in [1 Corinthians 15:29-34](#) should motivate the Corinthians to revive their belief in the resurrection. How should belief in the resurrection motivate believers, some of whom may even be killed for their faith ([1 Cor. 15:31-32](#))? How should it motivate godly living ([1 Cor. 15:32b-34](#))?
4. In this final section, Paul compares the present human body to the future resurrection body. Make a side-by-side list of the two states. Take into account chronology, physicality, the biblical storyline, and eternity. What are some of the ways our current bodies will be transformed after the resurrection?



5. In [1 Corinthians 15:54–55](#), Paul is citing portions of [Isaiah 25:8](#) and [Hosea 13:14](#). How are those texts used in their original contexts, and how is Paul using them to further his case in this passage? What links do you see between these uses?

6. In [1 Corinthians 15:58](#), Paul gives a final exhortation that is a powerful conclusion of his entire argument up to this point. What are the four actions and attitudes the Corinthians should possess as a result of the resurrection?

Week 15

The Collection for the Saint, Travel Plan, and Farewell Greetings (1 Cor 16:1-24)

The Place of the Passage

The letter concludes with Paul reminding the Corinthians about an important collection for the needy Jerusalem church ([Acts 24:17](#)) and then giving a few updates on his travel plans and finally a brief farewell greeting. The collection for the Jerusalem church was a pointed application of the main theme of 1 Corinthians, for this collection was itself the selfless ministry of a Gentile church to a Jewish church, a beautiful expression of unity around the work of Christ. It was an act of love. Paul had laid out the theological reality of the gospel and how it draws people out of selfishness, pride, elitism, and competitiveness, into a blood-bought unity of those who put their faith and identity in Christ. Even Paul's travel updates assume this unity and love, which are the golden threads of his letter, as he was full of eagerness to see these beloved friends. He ends where he began, with the grace of the Lord Jesus, expressed through his love ([1 Cor. 16:23](#)).

The Big Picture

[First Corinthians 16:1–24](#) reveals that gospel unity must be embodied through acts of grace and love, as illustrated here by a collection taken by the Corinthians for the Jerusalem church, by Paul's heartfelt desire to visit with the Corinthians, by the way Paul desires this church to treat other leaders, and by the way Paul encourages this church to press on in faith and mission.

1. The letter concludes with a reminder that Paul will be visiting Corinth to collect money for the Jerusalem church. How was the money to be collected ([1 Cor. 16:1–2](#))? How would this collection embody the main ideas of this letter?

2. Paul describes his future travel plans ([1 Cor. 16:5–9](#)). How does this reveal the heart of a pastor who at times must rebuke his sheep, and yet who closes his letter with such words as these?

3. Paul speaks of a ministry opportunity in Ephesus that compels him to remain there, and yet he adds that there were also many adversaries there ([1 Cor. 16:8](#)). How is it that both the open door for ministry and the existence of adversaries to the faith are compelling reasons for Paul to stay in a given area?

4. Paul draws his letter to a close with a farewell admonition, offering five imperatives: “Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love” ([1 Cor. 16:13–14](#)). How does each of these relate to larger themes in the letter?

5. Paul encourages the Corinthians to be subject to and give recognition to people like the household of Stephanas and other gospel workers ([1 Cor. 16:15–18](#)). Given the teaching they had received to this point, how might the Corinthians have had their minds shaped regarding servanthood, subjection, and giving recognition to others?

6. Look at [1 Corinthians 1](#) and this final chapter, [1 Corinthians 16](#), and consider: How do the bookends of 1 Corinthians compare to each other? How are tensions resolved? How are themes fulfilled? How is the tone of the two chapters different?

Weeks 16 & 17

Themes – Class Reports –

First Corinthians covers a number of topics (see Key Themes, below). One theme emerges from these discussions, however, as Paul's dominant concern. Paul wants this church, divided because of the arrogance of its more powerful members, to work together for the advancement of the gospel. He wants them to drop their divisive one-upmanship, build up the faith of those who are weak, and witness effectively to unbelievers.

Divide into five groups, working together to make a class report, Choose a theme and make a class report. This should cover two class periods.

1. **Since the church is the dwelling place of God's Spirit, the people who make up the church should work for unity by building each other up.**

[1 Corinthians 1:10–4:21](#) (esp. 1 Corinthians 3:10–16; 14:12)

2. **Christians should build up the church in four practical ways:**

They should be sensitive to those of fragile faith (1 Cor. 8:1–9:18; 10:28, 33). They should win unbelievers through culturally sensitive evangelism (1 Cor. 9:19–23; 10:27, 32–33). They should conduct worship services in such a way that unbelievers present might come to faith ([1 Cor. 14:16, 23–25](#)). Their corporate worship should use spiritual gifts not for personal display, or evaluating who has a better gift, but to build up the church ([1 Cor. 11:2–16; 12:12–30; 14:1–35](#)).

3. **Sexual relations form a union between man and woman as profound as the union of the believer with Christ, and so sexual activity should be confined to marriage.**

1 Corinthians 5:1–13; 6:12–20; 7:5, 9, 36

4. **Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are important, but both are subordinate to personal trust in the gospel and to living in the way that God commands.**

[1 Corinthians 1:14–17; 10:1–5; 11:17–34; 15:29–34](#)

5. **The bodily resurrection of Jesus (and of his followers) from the dead is a critical component of Christian faith and practice.**

[1 Corinthians 6:14; 15:1–58](#)

Week 18 Summary and Conclusions

The Big Picture of 1 Corinthians

During our study of this letter, we detected the main theme of gospel unity. The letter began by informing the reader that this church was fractured and needed its vision of the gospel restored and, consequently, its unity rebuilt around Jesus. The letter is quite practical all the way through, but in [1 Corinthians 1–4](#), a baseline theological reality involving proclamation, wisdom, and unity is established, while [1 Corinthians 5–15](#) apply that vision to practical matters of behavior and belief.

[First Corinthians 1–4](#) is a powerful rebuke and encouragement and uses some of the most elevated language in Scripture with regard to the cross and its implications for Christian character. The Corinthians were divided, with factions following different Christian leaders ([1 Cor. 1:10–17a](#)). The underlying issue was pride due to a lack of understanding of God’s sovereign and infinite grace. This pride fostered self-sufficiency, elitism, competitiveness, and thus disunity. There were cultural and social pressures, and the Corinthians were giving way to those pressures out of a superficial understanding of the gospel. Paul’s response was to show them that the gospel turned their worldview upside down, that all that they thought was wise and powerful was actually weak, and that God’s wisdom and power were made known through the death of his Son upon the cross, as proclaimed by humble preachers ([1 Cor. 1:17b–4:21](#)).

[First Corinthians 5–15](#) takes up practical matters, some of which were occasioned by a previous interchange of letters that are not included in the Bible. From sexual purity, to legal cases; from issues of marriage, divorce, and betrothal, to food and idolatry; from worship order to the truth of the bodily resurrection, Paul uses the baseline argument of [1 Corinthians 1–4](#) to expose, rebuke, rebuild, and encourage gospel unity and godliness.

Paul concludes his letter with a brief yet powerful reminder about his effort to collect money for the poor in the Jerusalem church, a vivid expression of gospel unity in that a Gentile church was sacrificing to help a Jewish church ([1 Cor. 16:1–24](#)).

The first section of the book ([1 Corinthians 1–4](#)) teaches that true power, wisdom, and worth are in Christ crucified. The second section ([1 Corinthians 5–15](#)) teaches that the cross changes our view of all activities, personal and communal. Paul anchors his letter in the truth of the resurrection, reminding us that the power of the cross was vindicated, fulfilled, and released in the resurrection of Jesus. Throughout the letter, we are reminded that this glorious cross and resurrection truth brings about loving unity among believers ([1 Cor. 13:1–13](#)). (For further background, see the ESV Study Bible, pages 2187–2191, available online at www.esvbible.org.)

1. How has your understanding of the place of 1 Corinthians in the sweep of the Bible been deepened through this study?
2. Did you see any particular connections to the Old Testament in 1 Corinthians that are new to you?
3. How has your understanding of the themes of “true power” and “true unity” been enhanced through your study of 1 Corinthians?
4. How has 1 Corinthians clarified and established the unity of the entire Bible for you?
5. What development has your study of this letter brought about in your view of who Jesus is and how he fulfills the Old Testament?