



## Summary of 1 Corinthians

### Introduction

Paul names himself as the author and Corinth as the recipient church. The letter was written from Ephesus during the spring of AD53, 54 or 55, shortly before Paul left the city to travel to Corinth via Macedonia.

The church in Corinth had been planted and nurtured by Paul. When he received word that there was dissension in the church over several issues, such as sexual immorality, marriage, corporate gatherings, resurrection and spiritual gifts, Paul found it necessary to write to them ahead of his intended visit in order to address the problems.

### Chapter One

Paul identifies himself as the writer of this letter to the church in Corinth and the opening serves as a preface to the whole letter, setting the tone for what is to come. That is, Jesus is the focus and Paul is thankful for the Corinthians despite the issues he feels it necessary to address.

Paul had received a verbal report of divisions in the church, especially with regard to people dividing their loyalties and aligning themselves with their different human teachers rather than remaining true to the Gospel that they had been taught.

Corinth was a society where power, wealth, and status were everything. People looked up to those of higher social status and aspired to be among them. Paul demonstrates that this is contrary to the teaching of the Gospel, where God has shown that his own greater wisdom and strength is to be seen in what he has done through those who are often drawn from the lower echelons of society. Even the death and resurrection of Jesus was seen by some to be foolishness, for they misunderstood the strength and power of God's actions in offering salvation in this way.

## Chapter Two

Paul commences this chapter by reminding the church in Corinth that, unlike the philosophers of the day with their well crafted rhetoric and witty presentations, he had come to them in weakness yet with a profound message of truth. The Gospel, already described by Paul as foolishness to the Greeks, was actually delivered to them by the power of God's Holy Spirit and that is why its truth can be believed.

It is this message that reveals the true wisdom of God. For in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God had revealed his depth of love for his created beings and had offered them a different path to that which appears to so many through the actions of a world corrupt and dying in this present age.

## Chapter Three

In this chapter Paul accuses the Corinthians of their worldliness and divisions. He reminds them of their responsibilities to build upon the single foundation that Paul had first laid for them, which was the Gospel of Christ.

Paul reminds them that they and their teachers are merely human. He encourages them to give due honour to their bodies by keeping them pure, and to humility and self-diffidence. He then warns them against glorying in particular leaders and teachers because they were teaching a unified message. All who profess the faith belong to Jesus and Jesus belongs to God.

## Chapter Four

This chapter has two key themes. The first describes the role of the apostles in teaching and guiding the church. Paul describes himself, Apollos and the others as being stewards of the church, teaching the people from the oracles of God and unpacking some of the mysteries that surround the Gospel. He states that apostles should not be judged by the people for they are enduring many hardships for the services they are providing, which remains an incomplete work until the Lord returns in judgement.

Paul concludes the chapter by claiming parental rights over the church, which require him not just to teach and guide in love, but also to admonish those who are asserting their authority over the church due to their arrogant pride.

## Chapter Five

This brief chapter deals with a specific instance of gross sexual immorality that Paul clearly states must be dealt with. However, Paul's tone tends to support the suggestion that lax morality and acceptance of such practice by arrogant leaders was rife. He admonishes those in the church for not making a stance against such behaviour for, by not doing so, they are seen to be condoning it.

Chapter five commences the exploration of two key questions in Paul's mind:

1. Where are the lines of morality and behaviour to be drawn, and how do we know?
2. What kind of discipline is appropriate in cases of severe misbehaviour?

## Chapter Six

Paul states that some members of the church were bringing shame on themselves by taking other believers before the local courts instead of bringing their grievance before suitable church leaders. He reminds them that one day believers will be called upon to judge angels, so surely they could seek suitable arbitration between one another. Paul clearly believed that even this muddled church community were people of God and therefore could be entrusted to deal with matters between its members.

He also states that sinners will not inherit the Kingdom of God, reminding them that it is what they once were before becoming justified by faith. This is a pointer to the fact that they should indeed exercise more tolerance and even be prepared to be wronged for the sake of Christ.

Paul states that the body of a believer is a temple to the Lord and belongs to God. Therefore, they are to honour their bodies in the sight of God with what they eat and by proper sexual conduct, something that should have been between man and wife, and certainly not with prostitutes! It is a passage about identifying what the body was created for and using it according to its purpose.

## Chapter Seven

The letter to date shows there were some in Corinth who were for casting off all moral constraint, whereas there were some stating there should be extreme moral severity. Paul commences the chapter by indicating that abstinence from sexual intercourse is a good thing. However, those who are married should enjoy a healthy sexual relationship with each other. Celibacy for the single and sexual pleasure within marriage are both gifts from God to the individual.

Paul then moves on to the issue of divorce, reminding them that it was ordained by God that marriage was a lifelong commitment and that couples should remain together. If they do separate they should remain single. He continues by teaching that, if a believer is married to an unbeliever and they are happy together, then they should remain married, but if the unbeliever chooses to leave then the other person has no obligation to invite them back.

Paul informs the church that the social status of a person does not matter; what is important is that they have been called into God's service.

The theme of the letter then returns to marital status, with Paul stating that people should remain as they presently were, married or unmarried, although he does say that anyone who is betrothed to be married can do so, warning that it will produce problems for them on a personal level. He gives this opinion because he knows that the world is about to change and all the former ways will pass. Whether he was referring to the Day of Judgement or the severe famine caused by a grain shortage throughout the Roman Empire is unclear.

The chapter concludes by Paul outlining how the pressures that married people face can deflect them from their service to God. He writes that, if it is within the personal will to do so, then it is better for the unmarried to remain that way. However, if they do choose to marry, it should be to another believer, and that would be an acceptable thing.

When a woman becomes a widow she is free in law to marry again. However, Paul believed that it would be better for her not to do so.

### Chapter Eight

This chapter sees the start of a longer argument about regulations surrounding the eating of food and the effects that can have on the community of faith. Paul starts by warning of the potential pitfalls of eating food sacrificed to the pagan gods.

### Chapter Nine

As their apostle, Paul should have been entitled to financial support for the work he was doing. He argues his case from both the perspective of the world and from Scripture. Yet he makes it clear that he does not intend to seek any reward other than that which he gets from faithfully proclaiming the Gospel.

Paul makes much of his own freedom and yet he willingly becomes a slave of the Gospel he was sent to proclaim. Paul's overall point was to make the Corinthians, and any other readers of the letter, see that Christian freedom is not freedom to do what one likes, but freedom from all the things that stops one from being the person God really wants one to be, which is freedom for the service of God and the Gospel.

### Chapter Ten

Paul is concerned that history may repeat itself and provides a lesson from the OT with regard to the failures of the Israelites to acknowledge what God had done for them in bringing them out of Egyptian slavery.

Paul alludes to the fact that the Corinthians were now in a similar situation and he fears repetition of the same mistakes that were made in the wilderness, especially a return to idolatry. Yet he encourages them by reminding them that God is faithful and they will not be tested beyond their endurance.

Paul speaks of the difference between partaking fully in the Lord's Supper and accepting food sacrificed to idols in the manner in which it is intended to represent, that is, participating with demons. He warns against believers of the potential consequences of participating in both.

Finally, Paul returns to the theme of eating food sacrificed to idols but this time from the perspective of eating it in a private home, especially one of an unbeliever. Paul wants the Corinthians to act toward others in a way that will not inhibit the advance of the Gospel.

### Chapter Eleven

Paul commences with a discussion about the conduct and appearance of men and women during corporate gatherings. Although men and women are equal in God's sight, Paul explains how they are to remain distinct for this is to the glory of God, celebrating the differences that he had created.

Paul then moves to issues over the Lord's Supper. It appears that divisions had occurred based on social status and wealth. Instead of Communion being a

family act of worship, it had become a separation of those who would come along to feast and those who had very little or nothing at all.

Paul teaches them the purpose of Communion and the need for all believers to participate in a worthy manner. They are to ensure that their hearts are set on Christ before attending such meetings.

## Chapter Twelve

Within an orchestra there are some instruments that a musician would consider to be superior to others. For example, the stringed instruments are often considered more superior to all other instruments and, within the strings, the violinists would claim superiority. Similar claims might be made within the wind section, with flautists claiming superiority over trombones and tubas.

The church in Corinth had adopted an attitude that some spiritual gifts were superior to others and those with such gifts, especially it seems the ability to speak in tongues, tended to look down on others with the 'lesser gifts'. The problem Paul now confronts in Corinth is that, within the Christian orchestra so to speak, there were some who considered themselves superior to others, and there was a danger, as a result, that the whole symphony might be played out of balance and even out of tune.

Paul initially enlightens the Corinthians to the fact that all the gifts are given according to the will of the Holy Spirit for the purpose of building up the whole church, the body of Christ. He then writes quite clearly that this body is made up of many members that are all interdependent on each other, regardless of the specific function they are designed for.

Paul's conclusion is that it is God who calls each individual into service and equips them accordingly; the church should be thankful to God for that. He agrees that there are different types of instruments in the orchestra but that each needs the same level of musicianship to be effective. He alludes to the fact that it is not within their power to possess such gifts, although he does encourage them to strive for the greater ones.

Paul's eagerness that the Corinthians should understand how every single member in the Christian family matters as much as every other one is leading him to lay deep foundations for the practical application of all this in Chapter 14. In doing so he has taken the metaphor of the body, which was well known in the ancient world as a picture for civic society, and has made it function in quite a new way altogether.

## Chapter Thirteen

Some people have referred to the following verses as Paul's love chapter and parts of it are frequently read out at weddings and funerals. However, Paul is still addressing the issues of the problems that had arisen during church meetings. Indeed, the chapter should be introduced by the concluding clause of Chapter Twelve: <<*And I will show you a still more excellent way*>> (1 Corinthians 12:31b).

Therefore, Paul brings together his argument on spiritual gifts to clearly show that, whichever gift an individual may have been given, if it is not used in love then it has no purpose; for love is God's greatest gift. After all, God gave his Son to the world in love.

Those who hold to the notion that Paul was an unpleasant, argumentative character should note that he could not have written in this way, especially not to a group of people who knew him so well, unless it reflected at least a part of his true self.

#### Chapter Fourteen

Paul takes the theory of Chapter 12, seen in the light of Chapter 13, and applies it to the real problem, which is the tension between those who possess and practise different spiritual gifts. The contrast is between the person who builds up their private spirituality and the person who, in public worship, builds up the whole community.

Paul wants those in the church to exercise their gifts effectively and appropriately, giving thought to the effects on unbelievers that speaking in tongues may have if the message is not interpreted. He would rather have them prophesy than speak in tongues.

Ultimately, the purpose of having spiritual gifts is to build up the church and this can only be achieved if they are used appropriately and with discipline. It is all about making sure that public worship builds everybody up rather than simply everybody developing their own spiritual giftedness and displaying it like so many strutting peacocks.

#### Chapter Fifteen

This chapter forms a great climax to the whole letter. Paul is still trying to get the Corinthians to understand where they are in God's long story of humanity.

It appears that the Corinthians had raised some doubts in their letter over the certainty of the resurrection of believers and Paul argues convincingly the historical accuracy of Jesus' resurrection and therefore the eventual eternal state for all who have placed their hope in him. After all, if there is no resurrection then Christian faith is futile and nonexistent.

#### Chapter Sixteen

The letter concludes with instructions to the Corinthians to prepare their offering for the poor in Judæa and informs them of Paul's travel plans that will include a visit to them. He then finishes with personal greetings and a benediction, reminding them that it is love that binds them together.