

# THE GREATER GIFTS, PART 1

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The Gathering, Pt. 5, 1 Corinthians 14:1-12

January 7, 2024

*But eagerly desire the greater gifts.  
And now I will show you the most excellent way [the way of love] . . . .  
Follow that way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts,  
especially the gift of prophecy.*

1 Corinthians 12:31, followed by the Love Chapter, then 14:1

## How spiritual gifts are supposed to work when we've added love

*Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. <sup>2</sup> For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. <sup>3</sup> But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. <sup>4</sup> He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. <sup>5</sup> I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.*

*<sup>6</sup> Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? <sup>7</sup> Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? <sup>8</sup> Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? <sup>9</sup> So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. <sup>10</sup> Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. <sup>11</sup> If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. <sup>12</sup> So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.*

1 Corinthians 14:1-12

1. The conflict between those with the gift of prophecy and those with the gift of tongues is just the next confusion Paul addresses (see the poster for the "Gathering" section of 1 Corinthians)
2. Paul has changed the metaphor from a body to a building, and Paul has shifted the key topic from spiritual gifts to the fruit of the Spirit, and now back to spiritual gifts. Key themes:
  - Spiritual gifts (Chapter 12): diversity and interdependence, gifts are an experience of grace
  - Fruit of the Spirit (Chapter 13): gifts require fruit, the fruit best reflects the character of God
3. The word that ties them together is that all the gifts are given to edify the church, not for the benefit of the person with the gift (sounds a lot like Paul's definition of love in Chapter 13!)

## **When prophets and those who speak in tongues begin to work together**

<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. <sup>28</sup> And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. <sup>29</sup> Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? <sup>30</sup> Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup> But eagerly desire the greater gifts.

1 Corinthians 12

<sup>8</sup> Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. <sup>12</sup> Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13

### 1. Paul begins the lesson by going back to unity (see 1 Corinthians 1-4)

Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. <sup>2</sup> You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. <sup>3</sup> Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>4</sup> There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12:1

### 2. These two gifts are especially in need of humility

<sup>3</sup> For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. <sup>4</sup> Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup> We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith.

Romans 12

### 3. The goal for both gifts is understanding that leads to edification

<sup>6</sup> Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? <sup>7</sup> Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? <sup>8</sup> Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? <sup>9</sup> So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. <sup>10</sup> Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. <sup>11</sup> If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. <sup>12</sup> So it is with you.

1 Corinthians 14

## Being prophetic in the twenty-first century

1. Prophecy is needed and open to testing (see Acts 17:10-12)

<sup>19</sup> Do not put out the Spirit's fire; <sup>20</sup> do not treat prophecies with contempt. <sup>21</sup> Test everything. Hold on to the good. <sup>22</sup> Avoid every kind of evil.

1 Thessalonians 5

2. Prophecy is a complex idea – but what we know for sure is that prophecy can never contradict what God has said

<sup>7</sup> We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for a day. <sup>8</sup> Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. <sup>9</sup> He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

<sup>10</sup> After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. <sup>11</sup> Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.' "

Acts 21

3. The purpose of prophetic gift is to edify

<sup>3</sup> But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. <sup>4</sup> He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

1 Corinthians 14

Strengthening:

Encouragement:

Comfort:

4. Warning to those with the gift of prophecy: This gift is NOT objective evidence of a relationship with Jesus (but "good fruit" is!)

<sup>15</sup> "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. <sup>16</sup> By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

<sup>21</sup> "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' <sup>23</sup> Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' "

Matthew 7

5. The lesson for prophetic speakers from the tongues speakers: Clarity is kindness

<sup>6</sup> Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? <sup>7</sup> Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? <sup>8</sup> Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? <sup>9</sup> So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. <sup>10</sup> Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. <sup>11</sup> If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. <sup>12</sup> So it is with you.

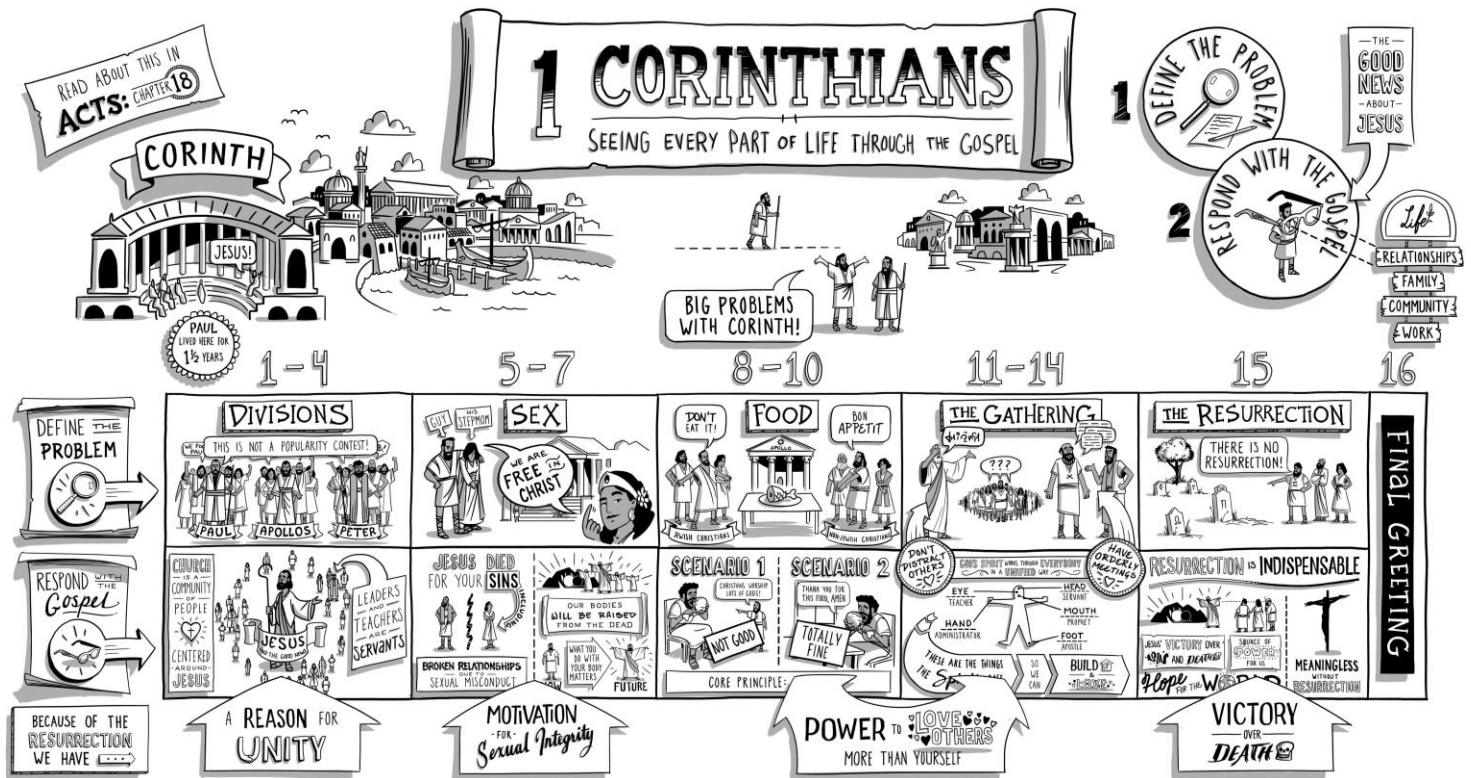
1 Corinthians 14

6. Speaking the truth is for everyone!

<sup>11</sup> It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up <sup>13</sup> until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. <sup>15</sup> Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. <sup>16</sup> From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Ephesians 4 (see also 1 Peter 4:10-11)



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## Resources for further study

The Bible Project team does a great job of introducing 1 Corinthians at <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-1-corinthians/>

Spurgeon, Edwards and Ryle have 1 Corinthians 13 studies at <https://www.biblebb.com/brefindex/1co.htm>

Ryle's study 1 Corinthians 10:14 is a good summary of the book at <https://www.monergism.com/flee-idolatry>

John Piper has a very good 1 Corinthians series at <https://www.desiringgod.org/scripture/1-corinthians/messages>

Keller has a wonderful piece on spiritual gifts at [www.trinitypca.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/0e1508579\\_discerning-and-exercising-spiritual-gifts.pdf](http://www.trinitypca.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/0e1508579_discerning-and-exercising-spiritual-gifts.pdf)

Doug has referenced these commentaries:

Simon Kistemaker's *New Testament Commentary* (Baker, 1993)

Anthony Thiselton's *NIGTC* volume (Eerdmans, 2000)

Harold Mare's commentary in the *EBC* series (Zondervan, 1976)

Derek Prime has a shorter study "Opening Up 1 Corinthians" (Day One, 2005)

Alexander Maclaren's commentary on this text is at

[https://www.preceptaustin.org/1\\_corinthians\\_maclaren\\_3#wl73](https://www.preceptaustin.org/1_corinthians_maclaren_3#wl73)

Ligon Duncan expresses well the very traditional "women should not teach with authority" at

<https://www.monergism.com/%E2%80%9Csilent-church-why-can%E2%80%99t-women-preach%E2%80%9D>

These are some cessationist resources (which I appreciate by don't fully agree with):

Greg Durand at [http://www.the-highway.com/tongues\\_Durand.html](http://www.the-highway.com/tongues_Durand.html)

Leonard Coppes at [http://www.the-highway.com/cessation-tongues\\_Coppes.html](http://www.the-highway.com/cessation-tongues_Coppes.html)

Challies has interviews with Wayne Grudem and Sam Waldron at

<https://www.challies.com/interviews/continuationism-and-cessationism-an-interview-with-dr-wayne-grudem/>

Thomas Edgar at [http://www.the-highway.com/cessation\\_Edgar.html](http://www.the-highway.com/cessation_Edgar.html)

Doug appreciated Kevin de Young's nuanced view of cessationism at

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/the-puritans-strange-fire-cessationism-and-the-westminster-confession/>

Doug likes the ESV Study Bible's introduction to 1 Corinthians and included it in these notes.

## 1 CORINTHIANS

### Introduction from the ESV

#### *Author and Title*

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 5:9).

### *Date*

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from the city of Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia (16:8, 19) sometime before the final day of Pentecost (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).

### *Theme*

First Corinthians covers a number of topics (see “Key Themes”). 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.

### *Purpose, Occasion, and 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 (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).

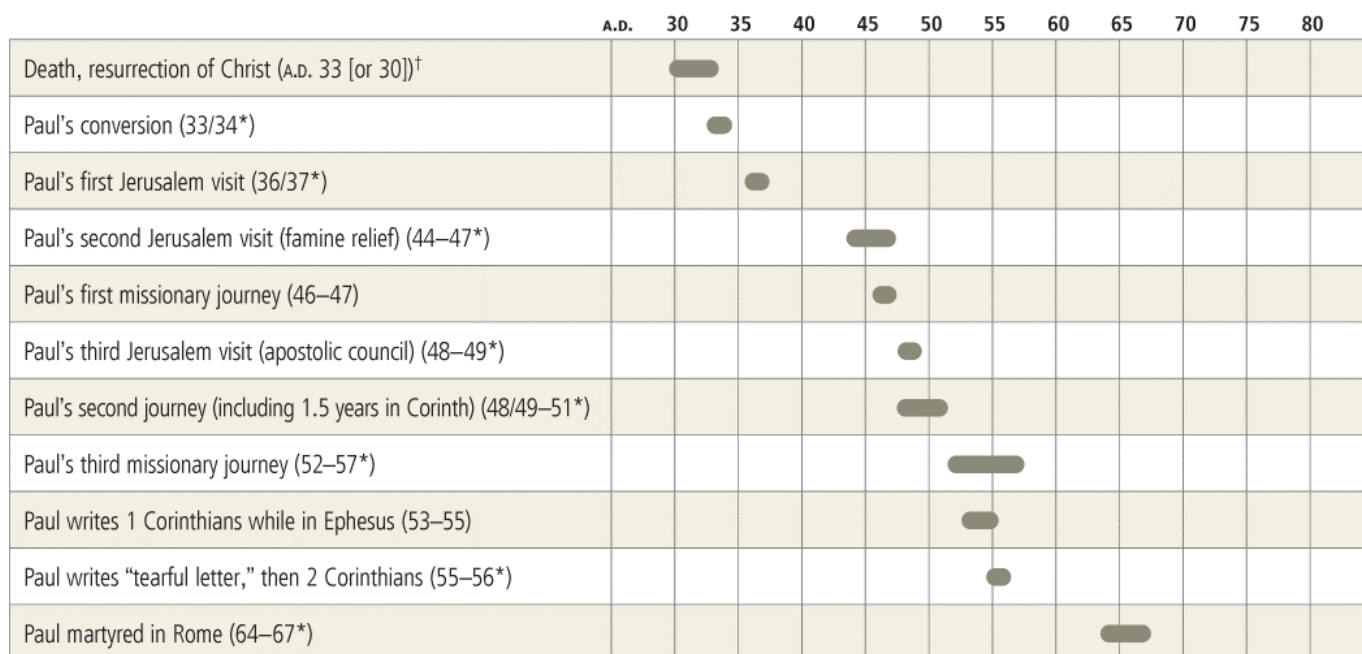
Paul settled in Ephesus for three years (Acts 20:31) and at some point wrote to the Corinthians the otherwise unknown letter that he mentions in 1 Corinthians 5:9. It is not known what prompted the letter but it dealt with sexual immorality, a persistent problem for the Corinthian church (5:1–13; 6:12–20). Sometime later, Paul received an oral report indicating that the Corinthians had not only misunderstood his first letter (5:10) but were plagued with serious problems of division, sexual immorality, and social snobbery (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 (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 (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 (1:30; 4:7). In addition, a self-centered insistence on their own rights (6:12; 8:9; 9:12; 10:23) at the expense of the weak (8:10; 11:22) and marginalized (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 (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 (5:1–2, 13; 7:19; 10:1–5). In addition, the dwelling of God’s Spirit within each believer (6:19) and the new unity that believers have with the resurrected, living Christ (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 (4:18–21; 5:2; 11:17, 22; 15:36), Paul was thankful to God for the Corinthians (1:8) and felt a deep personal affection for them (16:24). Because of this love, and for the purpose of God’s glory (10:31), Paul wanted the Corinthians to become a well-constructed dwelling place for God’s Spirit (3:12, 16) and to be “guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:8).

### *Timeline*



### *The Ancient City of Corinth*

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 bouleuterion (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).

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.

### *Key Themes*

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. 1:10–4:21 (esp. 3:10–16; 14:12)
2. Christians should build up the church in four practical ways:
  - a. they should be sensitive to those of fragile faith. 8:1–9:18; 10:28, 33
  - b. they should win unbelievers through culturally sensitive evangelism. 9:19–23; 10:27, 32–33
  - c. they should conduct worship services in such a way that unbelievers present might come to faith. 14:16, 23–25
  - d. their corporate worship should use spiritual gifts not for personal display, or evaluating who has a better gift, but to build up the church. 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. 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. 1:14–17; 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 6:14; 15:1–58



and practice.

### *History of Salvation Summary*

Christians are God's own people, the family of God, the body of Christ (12:12–31), and the temple of the Holy Spirit (3:16). As those who fulfill the OT pattern for the people of God, they are to be a holy community (1:2), reflecting God's character (1 Pet. 1:15–16). (For an explanation of the "History of Salvation," see the Overview of the Bible.)

### *Literary Features*

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.

### **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.

### *Outline*

- I. Epistolary Introduction to the Letter's Main Themes (1:1–9)
  - A. Greeting: apostleship, sanctity, and unity (1:1–3)
  - B. Thanksgiving: speech, knowledge, and spiritual gifts (1:4–9)
- II. Divisions over Christian Preachers (1:10–4:21)
  - A. The problem reported (1:10–17a)
  - B. God's wisdom answers the problem (1:17b–4:21)
    1. The nature of God's wisdom (1:17b–2:16)
    2. God's wisdom applied to Apollos, Paul, and the Corinthians (3:1–4:21)

- III. A Report of Sexual Immorality and Legal Wrangling (5:1–6:20)
  - A. Incest, arrogance, and the need for discipline (5:1–13)
  - B. Trivial cases before unrighteous judges (6:1–11)
  - C. Sexual immorality and the body’s resurrection (6:12–20)
- IV. Three Issues from a Corinthian Letter (7:1–11:1)
  - A. Marriage, divorce, and unchangeable circumstances (7:1–24)
  - B. The betrothed and widows (7:25–40)
  - C. Food offered to idols (8:1–11:1)
- V. Divisions over Corporate Worship (11:2–14:40)
  - A. Head coverings and worship (11:2–16)
  - B. Social snobbery at the Lord’s Table (11:17–34)
  - C. Elevating one spiritual gift above others (12:1–14:40)
- VI. The Futility of Faith If the Dead Are Not Raised (15:1–58)
  - A. The truthfulness of the traditions about Christ’s resurrection (15:1–11)
  - B. Christ’s resurrection and the resurrection of believers (15:12–34)
  - C. The nature of the resurrection body (15:35–58)
- VII. The Collection for the Saints and Travel Plans (16:1–12)
- VIII. Closing Admonitions and Greetings (16:13–24)<sup>1</sup>

## **WHAT LASTS**

Alexander Maclaren at [https://www.preceptaustin.org/1\\_corinthians\\_maclaren\\_3#wl73](https://www.preceptaustin.org/1_corinthians_maclaren_3#wl73)

‘Whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. 13. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three... ’—1 COR. xiii. 8, 13.

We discern the run of the Apostle's thought best by thus omitting the intervening verses and connecting these two. The part omitted is but a buttress of what has been stated in the former of our two verses; and when we thus unite them there is disclosed plainly the Apostle's intention of contrasting two sets of things, three in each set. The one set is ‘prophecies, tongues, knowledge’; the other, ‘faith, hope, charity.’ There also comes out distinctly that the point mainly intended by the contrast is the transiency of the one and the permanence of the other. Now, that contrast has been obscured and weakened by two mistakes, about which I must say a word.

With regard to the former statement, ‘Whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease,’ that has been misunderstood as if it amounted to a declaration that the miraculous gifts in the early Church were intended to be of brief duration. However true that may be, it is not what Paul means here. The cessation to which he refers is their cessation in the light of the perfect Future. With regard to the other statement, the abiding of faith, hope, charity, that, too, has been misapprehended as if it indicated that faith and hope belonged to this state of things only, and that love was the greatest of the three, because it

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<sup>1</sup> Crossway Bibles. (2008). [\*The ESV Study Bible\*](#) (pp. 2187–2191). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

was permanent. The reason for that misconception has mainly lain in the misunderstanding of the force of 'Now,' which has been taken to mean 'for the present,' as an implied contrast to an unspoken 'then'; just as in the previous verse we have, 'Now we see through a glass, *then* face to face.' But the 'now' in this text is not, as the grammarians say, temporal, but logical. That is, it does not refer to time, but to the sequence of the Apostle's thought, and is equivalent to 'so then.' 'So then abideth faith, hope, charity.'

The scope of the whole, then, is to contrast the transient with the permanent, in Christian experience. If we firmly grasped the truth involved, our estimates would be rectified and our practice revolutionised.

I. I ask this question—What will drop away?

Paul answers, 'prophecies, tongues, knowledge.' Now these three were all extraordinary gifts belonging to the present phase of the Christian life. But inasmuch as these gifts were the heightening of natural capacities and faculties, it is perfectly legitimate to enlarge the declaration and to use these three words in their widest signification. So understood, they come to this, that all our present modes of apprehension and of utterance are transient, and will be left behind.

'Knowledge, it shall cease,' and as the Apostle goes on to explain, in the verses which I have passed over for my present purpose, it shall cease because the perfect will absorb into itself the imperfect, as the inrushing tide will obliterate the little pools in the rocks on the seashore. For another reason, the knowledge, the mode of apprehension belonging to the present, will pass—because here it is indirect, and there it will be immediate. 'We shall know face to face,' which is what philosophers mean by intuition. Here our knowledge 'creeps from point to point,' painfully amassing facts, and thence, with many hesitations and errors, groping its way towards principles and laws. Here it is imperfect, with many a gap in the circumference; or like the thin red line on a map which shows the traveller's route across a prairie, or like the spider's thread in the telescope, stretched athwart the blazing disc of the sun—'but then face to face.' Incomplete knowledge shall be done away; and many of its objects will drop, and much of what makes the science of earth will be antiquated and effete. What would the hand-loom weaver's knowledge of how to throw his shuttle be worth in a weaving-shed with a thousand looms? Just so much will the knowledges of earth be when we get yonder.

Modes of utterance will cease. With new experiences will come new methods of communication. As a man can speak, and a beast can only growl or bark, so a man in heaven, with new experiences, will have new methods of communication. The comparison between that mode of utterance which we now have, and that which we shall then possess, will be like the difference between the old-fashioned semaphore, that used to wave about clumsy wooden arms in order to convey intelligence, and the telegraph.

Think, then, of a man going into that future life, and saying 'I knew more about Sanscrit than anybody that ever lived in Europe'; 'I sang sweet songs'; 'I was a past master in philology, grammars, and lexicons'; 'I was a great orator.' 'Tongues shall cease'; and the modes of utterance that belonged to earth, and all that holds of them, will drop away, and be of no more use.

If these things are true, brethren, with regard even to the highest form of these high and noble things, how much more and more solemnly true are they with regard to the aims and objects which most of us have in view? They will all drop away, and we shall be left, stripped of what, for most of us, has made the whole interest and activity of our lives.

II. What will last?

‘So then, abideth these three, faith, hope, love.’ When Paul takes three nouns and couples them with a verb in the singular, he is not making a slip of the pen, or committing a grammatical blunder which a child could correct. But there is a great truth in that piece of apparent grammatical irregularity; for the faith, the hope, and the love, for which he can only afford a singular verb, are thereby declared to be in their depth and essence one thing, and it, the triple star, abides, and continues to shine. The three primitive colours are unified in the white beam of light. Do not correct the grammar, and spoil the sense, but discern what he means when he says, ‘Now, abideth faith, hope, love.’ For this is what he means, that the two latter come out of the former, and that without it they are nought, and that it without them is dead.

Faith breeds Hope. *There* is the difference between earthly hopes and Christian people's hopes. Our hopes, apart from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, are but the balancing of probabilities, and the scale is often dragged down by the clutch of eager desires. But all is baseless and uncertain, unless our hopes are the outcome of our faith. Which, being translated into other words, is just this, that the one basis on which men can rest—ay! even for the immediate future, and the contingencies of life, as well as for the solemnities and certainties of heaven—any legitimate and substantial hope is trust in Jesus Christ, His word, His love, His power, and for the heavenly future, in His Resurrection and present glory. A man who believes these things, and only that man, has a rock foundation on which he can build his hope.

Faith, in like manner, is the parent of Love. Paul and John, diverse as they are in the whole cast of their minds, the one being speculative and the other mystical, the one argumentative and the other simply gazing and telling what he sees, are precisely agreed in regard to this matter. For, to the Apostle of Love, the foundation of all human love towards God is, ‘We have known and believed the love that God hath to us,’ and ‘We love Him because He first loved us,’ and to Paul the first step is the trusting reception of the love of God, ‘commended to us’ by the fact that ‘whilst we were yet sinners Christ died for us,’ and from that necessarily flows, if the faith be genuine, the love that answers the sacrifice and obeys the Beloved. So faith, hope, love, these three are a trinity in unity, and it abideth. That is the main point of our last text. Let me say a word or two about it.

I have said that the words have often been misunderstood as if the ‘now’ referred only to the present order of things, in which faith and hope are supposed to find their only appropriate sphere. But that is clearly not the Apostle's meaning here, for many reasons with which I need not trouble you. The abiding of all three is eternal abiding, and there is a heavenly as well as an earthly form of faith and hope as well as of love. Just look at these points for a moment.

‘Faith abides,’ says Paul, yonder, as here. Now, there is a common saying, which I suppose ninety out of a hundred people think comes out of the Bible, about faith being lost in sight. There is no such teaching in Scripture. True, in one aspect, faith is the antithesis of sight. True, Paul does say ‘We walk by faith, not by sight.’ But that antithesis refers only to part of faith's significance. In so far as it is the opposite of sight, of course it will cease to be in operation when ‘we shall know even as we are known’ and ‘see Him as He is.’ But the essence of faith is not in the absence of the person trusted, but the emotion of trust which goes out to the person, present or absent. And in its deepest meaning of absolute dependence and happy confidence, faith abides through all the glories and the lustres of the heavens, as it burns amidst the dimnesses and the darknesses of earth. For ever and ever, on through the irrevoluble ages of eternity, dependence on God in Christ will be the life of the glorified, as it was the life of the militant, Church. No millenniums of possession, and no imaginable increases in beauty and perfectness and enrichment with the wealth of God, will bring us one inch nearer to casting off the state of filial dependence which is, and ever will be, the condition of our receiving them all. Faith ‘abides.’

Hope ‘abides.’ For it is no more a Scriptural idea that hope is lost in fruition, than it is that faith is lost in sight. Rather that Future presents itself to us as the continual communication of an inexhaustible God to our

progressively capacious and capable spirits. In that continual communication there is continual progress. Wherever there is progress there must be hope. And thus the fair form, which has so often danced before us elusive, and has led us into bogs and miry places and then faded away, will move before us through all the long avenues of an endless progress, and will ever and anon come back to tell us of the unseen glories that lie beyond the next turn, and to woo us further into the depths of heaven and the fulness of God. Hope 'abides.'

Love 'abides.' I need not, I suppose, enlarge upon that thought which nobody denies, that love is the eternal form of the human relation to God. It, too, like the mercy which it clasps, 'endureth for ever.'

But I may remind you of what the Apostle does not explain in our text, that it is greater than its linked sisters, because whilst faith and hope belong only to a creature, and are dependent and expectant of some good to come to themselves, and correspond to something which is in God in Christ, the love which springs from faith and hope not only corresponds to, but resembles, that from which it comes and by which it lives. The fire kindled is cognate with the fire that kindles; and the love that is in man is like the love that is in God. It is the climax of his nature; it is the fulfilling of all duty; it is the crown and jewelled clasp of all perfection. And so 'abideth faith, hope, love, and the greatest of these is love.'

III. Lastly, what follows from all this?

First, let us be quite sure that we understand what this abiding love is. I dare say you have heard people say 'Ah! I do not care much about Paul's theology. Give me the thirteenth chapter of the first Epistle to the Corinthians. That is beautiful; that praise of Love; *that* comes home to men.' Yes, very beautiful. Are you quite sure that you know what Paul means by 'love'? I do not use the word charity, because that lovely word, like a glistening meteor that falls upon the earth, has a rust, as it were, upon its surface that dims its brightness very quickly. Charity has come to mean an indulgent estimate of other people's faults; or, still more degradingly, the giving of money out of your pockets to other people's necessities. These are what the people who do not care much about Paul's theology generally suppose that he means here. But these do not exhaust his meaning. Paul's notion of love is the response of the human love to the divine, which divine is received into the heart by simple faith in Jesus Christ. And his notion of love which never faileth, and endureth all things, and hopeth all things, is love to men, which is but one stream of the great river of love to God. If we rightly understand what he means by love, we shall find that his praise of love is as theological as anything that he ever wrote. We shall never get further than barren admiration of a beautiful piece of writing, unless our love to men has the source and root to which Paul points us.

Again, let us take this great thought of the permanence of faith, hope, and love as being the highest conception that we can form of our future condition. It is very easy to bewilder ourselves with speculations and theories of another life. I do not care much about them. The great gates keep their secret well. Few stray beams of light find their way through their crevices. The less we say the less likely we are to err. It is easy to let ourselves be led away, by turning rhetoric into revelation, and accepting the symbols of the New Testament as if they carried anything more than images of the realities. But far beyond golden pavements, and harps, and crowns, and white robes, lies this one great thought that the elements of the imperfect, Christlike life of earth are the essence of the perfect, Godlike life in heaven. 'Now abide these three, faith, hope, love.'

Last of all, let us shape our lives in accordance with these certainties. The dropping away of the transient things is no argument for neglecting or despising them; for our handling of them makes our characters, and our characters abide. But it is a very excellent argument for shaping our lives so as to seek first the first things, and to secure the permanent qualities, and so to use the transient as that it shall all help us towards that which does not pass.

What will a Manchester man that knows nothing except goods and office work, and knows these only in their superficial aspect, and not as related to God, what, in the name of common-sense, will he do with himself when he gets into a world where there is not a single ledger, nor a desk, nor a yard of cloth of any sort? What will some of us do when, in like manner, we are stripped of all the things that we have cared about, and worked for, and have made our aims down here? Suppose that you knew that you were under sailing orders to go somewhere or other, and that at any moment a breathless messenger might appear and say, 'Come along! we are all waiting for you'; and suppose that you never did a single thing towards getting your outfit ready, or preparing yourself in any way for that which might come at any moment, and could not but come before very long. Would you be a wise man? But that is what a great many of us are doing; doing every day, and all day long, and doing that only. 'He shall leave them in the midst of his days,' says a grim text, 'and at his latter end shall be a fool.'

What will drop? Modes of apprehension, modes of utterance, occupations, duties, relationships, loves; and we shall be left standing naked, stripped, as it were, to the very quick, and only as much left as will keep our souls alive. But if we are clothed with faith, hope, love, we shall not be found naked. Cultivate the high things, the permanent things; then death will not wrench you violently from all that you have been and cared for; but it will usher you into the perfect form of all that you have been and done upon earth. All these things will pass, but faith, hope, love, 'stay not behind nor in the grave are trod,' but will last as long as Christ, their Object, lives, and as long as we in Him live also.