

1st Corinthians



Introduction

This is Paul's longest epistle. It has 437 verses, whereas the next longest, Romans, has 433 verses. This letter does not delve into theology as much as it dwells on practical matters regarding eating meat sacrificed to idols, divisions in the church, incest and fornication practiced by believers, lawsuits, marriage and sex, liturgical abuses and many other practical matters.

Visitors to Ephesus had reported to Paul that serious problems existed in the Corinthian church. Divisions were rampant and there was quarreling. Paul condemned such factions and exhorted them to unity. One might wonder what Paul would think driving down Main Street in Anytown USA and seeing the multitude of denominations and divisions within Christianity today.

A letter had also arrived from the Corinthians were asking for Paul's advice or ruling on several matters including marriage and sex, food offered to idols and spiritual gifts. Much of First Corinthians is Paul's response to the problems reported and the questions asked in the letter. Unlike some of his other letters, in his letter to the Corinthians Paul seems to have a special affection for these people. He pours out his heart to them desiring to infuse his beloved readers with wisdom and correction. His poetic exhortation on love is one of the most exquisite compositions in any language. Chapter 13 is known as the "Love Chapter" in which Paul explains that all the gifts, spiritual or otherwise - eloquence, faith and sacrifice all melt into nothing compared to charity, the love we show God and one another.

The believers in Corinth were not new to spiritual gifts and prophetic utterances. The Temple of Apollo dominated the city skyline and the Greeks said it was the god Apollo who gave the gift of prophecy to whomever he willed. The problem was not ignorance of the gifts and fruits of the Spirit within the church as much as the abuse and wrongful use of these gifts from God. Paul addresses these problems at length.

Addressing the incest and immorality which was rampant in Corinth, Paul demands that Corinthians live a holy life in the presence of God. Chapter 7 is the "Marriage Chapter" where we learn much about Christian marriage, but also about celibacy. Paul, knowing the difficult sexual situation in Corinth states, "because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (1 Cor 7:2). In a culture where men owned their wives as property, Paul reveals that in Christian marriage "the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does (1 Cor 7:4). This teaching was counter-cultural and radical and laid the foundation for new views of women and society. Far from dominating and repressing women, the words of Paul set them free.

Paul also addresses the unmarried, challenging them to be content in their state of life. One who is married is concerned about temporal things whereas the unmarried can devote themselves fully to the Lord. This passage plays no small part in the Church's teaching on priestly celibacy. The spiritual gifts, public worship, the Lord's Supper, and practical matters of life are discussed in great detail as well.

Paul concludes this magnificent letter in chapter 15 with one of the most important passages in the New Testament: the "Resurrection Chapter". Tying the gospel into verifiable history—quite the opposite of the mythical gods of Greece and Rome—Paul affirms the actual and real bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. If there is no resurrection from the dead, we are of all men the most to be pitied. Was it just a good story, just a mythical episode? No. Paul tells us of witnesses to the resurrection, most still living (1 Cor 15:3–8). He calls them to the witness stand to testify to the truth of the physical resurrection of Christ. Then Paul, the revealer of mysteries, one who has himself visited the third heaven (2 Cor 12:2), explains the power of the resurrection and nature of the spiritual bodies we will proudly possess in glory.

Paul's prayers, letters, tradition, and frequent visits boosted the Corinthian church into the next century. We know from writings of the next few centuries that the church in Corinth continued faithful to the gospel, though not without continuing problems and difficulties.