

1 Corinthians

Authorship

Pauline authorship has not been seriously challenged. The Corinthian correspondence is an intensely personal and often pointed response to various problems in a church that Paul had founded and with which he had spent much time.

Date

Paul wrote the letter that we know as 1 Corinthians in the spring of A.D. 55 from Ephesus, not long after the Achaian church had responded to a previous letter from him.¹

Original Readers

The church at Corinth had been established by Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 18). It was made up mostly of Gentiles, who, as might be expected, were deeply ingrained with the iniquity of their infamous culture. Paul spent a great deal of time and effort ministering to this group of believers, both in residence and through letter.

Occasion

The church at Corinth, the capitol of Achaia, was established under the Spirit's sovereign direction on Paul's second missionary journey (his fifth Gentile preaching tour). As a place renown for its immorality, the city offered a persuasive showcase for God's redeeming and transforming grace. Though the Spirit had manifested himself in powerful ways, Paul had received word that there was still much pagan influence at work in the lives of these believers. In response to a report from the household of Chloe and in answer to specific questions sent by the church itself, Paul pens this problem-centered epistle in much the same tone as a father admonishing an unruly child.

Message

In light of the Lord's promised return, Christians ought not continue living like the world, but rather imitate Paul's ways in Christ.

Outline

- I. Introduction: Paul greets the church, thanking God for their giftedness. 1:1-9
 - A. Salutation: Paul greets the church at Corinth as saints who call on the name of the Lord. 1:1-3
 - B. Prayer of Thanksgiving: Paul thanks God for the Corinthian church. 1:4-9

¹ See "Supplement: Chronology of the Corinthian Correspondence."

1. For their reception of grace. 1:4
 2. For their enrichment in ability to testify of Christ. 1:5-6
 3. For their expectation of Christ's return. 1:7-8
 4. For God's faithfulness to the church. 1:9
- II. On Problems Reported: Paul responds to problems in the church reported by the household of Chloe. 1:10-6:20
- A. The Problem of Divisions: Paul appeals for unity in the church by addressing the underlying causes of their contentions. 1:10-4:21
1. The divisions are manifested in attachment to personalities rather than to Christ. 1:10-17
 2. The divisions are a result of foolish pride, utterly devoid of the wisdom of God. 1:18-4:21
 - a. God's wisdom is contrasted to the wisdom of the world. 1:18-3:4
 - 1) God's wisdom lay in the message of the cross. 1:18-25
 - 2) God's wisdom does not glory in the flesh. 1:26-31
 - 3) God's wisdom is demonstrated in God's power. 2:1-5
 - 4) God's wisdom is a mystery to the natural man. 2:6-3:4
 - b. God's wisdom is applied to the life of the church. 3:5-4:21
 - 1) Each one should give care to how he builds on the foundation of God's building, the church. 3:5-17
 - 2) No one should glory in men. 3:18-23
 - 3) No one should judge another steward's work. 4:1-5
 - 4) No one should be puffed up over personal differences. 4:6-13
 - c. God's wisdom is displayed in Paul's relationship to and interaction with the church. 4:14-21
- B. The Problem of Undisciplined Immorality: Paul directs the church to discipline a case of sexual immorality. 5:1-13
1. Paul condemns their pride in overlooking the sin. 5:1-2
 2. Paul commands church discipline for the sake of the offender. 5:3-5
 3. Paul commands church discipline for the sake of the church. 5:6-8
 4. Paul clarifies the issue of fellowship with believers given to sin. 5:9-13
- C. The Problem of Public Lawsuits: Paul condemns and corrects the practice of believers suing each other in secular courts. 6:1-11
1. Paul condemns the practice of believers not resolving their own disputes before the brethren. 6:1-6
 2. Paul commends acceptance of being wronged as against civil litigation. 6:7-8
 3. Paul holds up inheritance of the kingdom of God as a better motivation for the conduct of life now. 6:9-11
- D. The Problem of Physical Impurity: Paul condemns the misuse of the body and counsels its use to the glory of God. 6:12-20
1. Paul affirms the potential of living free from the body's sinful dictates. 6:12-14
 2. Paul affirms the impropriety of illicit sexual union. 6:15-18

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| | 3. Paul affirms the sanctity of the body as the temple of the Spirit. | 6:19-20 |
| III. | On Questions Posed: Paul answers some questions posed by the church. | 7:1–11:1 |
| | A. Concerning Marriage: Paul instructs the church on God’s will in marriage. | 7:1-40 |
| | 1. Paul instructs with regard to marriage. | 7:1-24 |
| | a. Paul enjoins conjugal responsibility in marriage. | 7:1-6 |
| | b. Paul commends continence apart from marriage only if appropriate. | 7:7-9 |
| | c. Paul commands faithfulness to the marriage covenant. | 7:10-16 |
| | d. Paul orders contentment in God’s chosen state of calling. | 7:17-24 |
| | 2. Paul instructs with regard to singleness. | 7:25-38 |
| | a. To the young unmarried, Paul counsels devotion to the Lord as the primary focus. | 7:25-35 |
| | 1) This is because of the distress in the present world. | 7:25-31 |
| | 2) This is because of the distractions of living in a marriage commitment. | 7:32-35 |
| | b. To the parents of a mature virgin Paul counsels thoughtful, personal decision. | 7:36-38 |
| | 3. Paul instructs with regard to genuine widowhood. | 7:39-40 |
| | a. She is free to remarry in the Lord. | 7:39 |
| | b. She is happier if she remains single. | 7:40 |
| | B. Concerning Contact with Idolatry: Paul instructs on the proper exercise of Christian liberty. | 8:1–11:1 |
| | 1. Liberty should not be exercised if it causes a weak brother to stumble. | 8:1-13 |
| | 2. Paul restricted the exercise of his liberty for the furtherance of the gospel. | 9:1-27 |
| | a. Paul relinquished his right to support so that he might preach the gospel. | 9:1-18 |
| | b. Paul made himself a servant to all in order to save some. | 9:19-23 |
| | c. Paul disciplined his body in order to fulfill his ministry. | 9:24-27 |
| | 3. Paul warns about the potential danger of falling into idolatry. | 10:1-22 |
| | a. Idolatry, as well as other sin, is produced by evil desire. | 10:1-10 |
| | b. God has provided escape from temptation. | 10:11-13 |
| | c. Idolatry must be avoided because it preempts fellowship with Christ. | 10:14-22 |
| | 4. Summary: Do everything to the glory of God. | 10:23–11:1 |
| | a. Live with a view to edification not personal indulgence. | 10:23-24 |
| | b. Live with a view to maintaining a clear conscience. | 10:25-27 |
| | c. Live with a view to deference to the conscience of others. | 10:28-30 |
| | d. Live with a view to glorifying God through the salvation of men. | 10:31-33 |
| | e. Live just as Paul did. | 11:1 |
| IV. | On Issues of Tradition: Paul instructs the church with regard to some received truths. | 11:2–15:58 |
| | A. Paul commends the church for being observant of apostolic tradition. | 11:2 |

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| B. | Paul instructs on a practice involving the principle of headship. | 11:3-16 |
| 1. | God has ordained an administrative order. | 11:3 |
| 2. | God has ordained a protocol for representative ministry between Himself and his human subjects. | 11:4-16 |
| a. | The protocol of head covering is enjoined with respect to prayer and prophecy, both representative ministries. | 11:4-5 |
| b. | The protocol is regulated with respect to God's created order. | 11:6-15 |
| 1) | It stems from the image and glory of God. | 11:6-7 |
| 2) | It stems from the order of the creating of man and woman. | 11:8-9 |
| 3) | It stems from the presence of the angels. | 11:10 |
| 4) | It recognizes the interdependency of man and woman. | 11:11-12 |
| 5) | It accords with a self-evident truth of nature. | 11:13-15 |
| c. | The protocol is the universal practice of the church. | 11:16 |
| C. | Paul instructs on the gathering of the church. | 11:17-14:40 |
| 1. | In gathering, the church has been demeaning the Lord's Supper. | 11:17-34 |
| a. | Paul charges the church with being factious. | 11:17-22 |
| b. | Paul reminds the church of the Lord's Supper tradition. | 11:23-26 |
| c. | Paul commands the church to discern the Lord's body. | 11:27-34 |
| 2. | In gathering, the church is ignorant of the Spirit's ministry. | 12:1-13:13 |
| a. | The Spirit is sovereignly working through each member of the body. | 12:1-11 |
| b. | The Spirit is sovereignly constructing the body. | 12:12-31 |
| 3. | In gathering, the church is failing to pursue the more excellent way of love. | 13:1-13 |
| 4. | In gathering, the church is ignoring the body's edification. | 14:1-40 |
| a. | They were being self-centered in their elevation of the gift of tongues. | 14:1-25 |
| b. | They were being disorderly in their exercise of ministry. | 14:26-40 |
| 1) | They were not speaking unto edification. | 14:26-33 |
| 2) | They were not restricting the speaking of women. | 14:34-36 |
| 3) | They were not submitting to apostolic tradition. | 14:37-40 |
| D. | Paul instructs on the doctrine of the resurrection. | 15:1-58 |
| 1. | Paul affirms the reality of the gospel's reception by the readers. | 15:1-2 |
| 2. | Paul establishes the reliability of the gospel tradition. | 15:3-11 |
| a. | Christ died and rose according to the Scriptures. | 15:3-4 |
| b. | Christ was seen by many witnesses. | 15:5-10 |
| 1) | He was seen by Cephas and the twelve. | 15:5 |
| 2) | He was seen by over five hundred brethren. | 15:6 |
| 3) | He was seen by James and all the apostles. | 15:7 |
| 4) | He was seen by Paul. | 15:8-10 |
| c. | Christ was preached to them and believed on. | 15:11 |
| 3. | Paul expounds on the ramifications of the resurrection. | 15:12-34 |
| a. | If there be no resurrection faith is in vain. | 15:12-19 |

- b. The resurrection is necessary for the accomplishment of God's kingdom program. 15:20-28
 - c. The resurrection is the only adequate explanation for Christian martyrdom. 15:29-34
 - 4. Paul explains the program of resurrection. 15:35-58
 - a. The body will be raised in a new form. 15:35-49
 - b. Not every Christian's body will see death. 15:50-53
 - c. Death will be swallowed up in victory. 15:54-57
 - 5. Paul exhorts to steadfastness in light of the certainty of the resurrection. 15:58
 - V. On a Promised Contribution: Paul admonishes the church to complete their ministry to the saints. 16:1-4
 - A. Paul directs in the prior collection of the gift. 16:1-2
 - B. Paul indicates the manner of the gift's delivery. 16:3-4
 - VI. Conclusion: Paul's parting instructions reveal his commitment to their well-being and their importance to the Lord. 16:5-24
 - A. Paul advises of his affairs and Timothy's arrival. 16:5-12
 - B. Paul admonishes the church to steadfastness and love. 16:13-14
 - C. Paul commends the work of certain of the brethren. 16:15-18
 - D. Paul communicates salutations and his blessing. 16:19-24

Argument

Though the church at Corinth was rife with problems, the apostle Paul treats it with the utmost respect and care as he seeks to move them to maturity in the faith. Though disappointed by their many shortcomings, Paul has confidence in God's power to renew and transform people. The Corinthian correspondence reveals the heart of a shepherd pursuing and disciplining his wayward sheep.

I. Introduction: Paul greets the church, thanking God for their giftedness (1:1-9).

Paul places the church at Corinth on full footing with all other local assemblies of believers. They are set apart in Christ for his special use just like all the rest who call on the name of Jesus Christ (1:1-2). Paul thanks God for the church when he thinks of how richly they had been endowed by the Holy Spirit for testimony concerning Christ. They were also eagerly awaiting Christ's return. Paul has great confidence in their ultimate destiny, though he would have much to say about their present lack (1:4-9).

II. On Problems Reported: Paul responds to problems in the church reported by the household of Chloe (1:10–6:20).

This is the first of three major sections of the letter. In it Paul addresses several problem areas that had been brought to his attention by one of the church's families. The

most important was the presence of contentious factions within the church, which Paul deals with extensively, even revisiting the problem in connection with some later issues (e.g. the Lord's Supper and the use of spiritual gifts).

A. The Problem of Divisions: Paul appeals for unity in the church by addressing the underlying causes of their contentions (1:10–4:21).

Union in Christ is meant to produce unity within the Christian community. The fact that the Corinthians were not experiencing such unity indicates that they are not functioning according to the truth. In seeking to remedy this situation, Paul addresses a number of issues. However, at the heart of it all lies the wisdom of God verses the wisdom of man.²

1. The divisions were manifested in attachment to personalities rather than to Christ (1:10-17). Factions inevitably come to center on certain influential individuals in a fleshly attempt to bolster one's own sense of esteem. In the Corinthian's case it was notable Christian leaders including Paul himself, and even Christ. Paul's retort focuses on the indivisibility of Christ and the relative incapacity of man. Their life derived from the cross of Christ (1:17) not from any contributory effort on the part of Christ's servants.

2. The divisions are a result of foolish pride, utterly devoid of the wisdom of God (1:18–4:21). When it came to wisdom, the Greeks had a lot to brag about from a human standpoint. Unfortunately, this wisdom did not lead to peace and harmony, as the Corinthian church was so sadly learning. To them the message of the cross was foolish. However, the Corinthian believers have experienced the wisdom of God in the salvation provided for them as a result of Christ's death (1:18-25). Another difference between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world is that God had chosen the foolish, weak and base things of the world to confound the things that were wise, mighty, and noble in the eyes of the world (1:26-31). This leaves no room for boastful pride in fleshly ability or accomplishment. The believers at Corinth are forgetting that they already had, in Jesus Christ, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. They need to transfer their boast to who Jesus is (1:29-31). When Paul had come to Corinth, he had not tried to establish himself as wise in man's eyes but had simply preached Christ and then allowed the Holy Spirit to demonstrate the power of God as that message was received (2:1-5). Not that the message lacked wisdom. It

² One is reminded of James' teaching on wisdom from above and below as it relates to envy and self-seeking—cf. James 3:13–18.

was just that the wisdom of the gospel is a mystery hidden in the counsels of God and only penetrable with the aid of the Holy Spirit (2:6-12). This is the kind of wisdom that Paul espouses and which the Corinthians have experienced, at least in its fundamental effect (2:13-16). Unfortunately, these believers have not progressed beyond spiritual infancy with the result that they are incapable of perceiving the fuller expression of God's wisdom as it relates to the living of life (3:1-4). This is the root cause of their envy, strife and divisions (3:3).

Having established the theology of the wisdom of God as displayed in the cross and experienced by the Spirit, Paul indicates how that wisdom displays itself in the life of the believer (3:5-4:21). In reality Paul and Apollos are not pride-boasting touchstones but servants of the Lord who have been sent to lay a foundation upon which the church can build itself up as the temple of God (3:5-17). True wisdom promotes the kind of careful building that will withstand the fire of God's evaluative scrutiny at the judgment seat of Christ (3:12-15). This is a building far different from the vaporous stuff that derives from the ego-driven desires of the flesh, clamoring for the praise of man. If this kind of building does not ensue, the church itself will be in danger of dissolution in a given community (3:16-17). The wise of this age glory in man to their own detriment. The Christian already has all that is eternal in Christ; boasting should be in Him alone (3:18-23).

Part of what Paul is contending with is those who build themselves up through criticism of others. In the case of the Corinthians, this criticism is of Paul himself. In response to that criticism Paul pleads exemption from judgment on the basis that as a servant of Christ he is a steward of the mysteries of God which makes the Lord his rightful evaluator (4:1-4). The Corinthian believers will do well to suspend such judgment of the servants of God and just give attention to their own service (4:5). In fact the very things that perhaps seem so ignoble in Paul and Apollos (cf. 4:9-13) have made it possible for the Corinthians to reign as kings from the standpoint of their spiritual possession (4:6-8). From a human standpoint the greatest display of wisdom available to the Corinthian church is the fatherly concern that Paul himself has for them (4:14-21). Reminiscent of the father in the book of Proverbs, Paul admonishes his children to learn from him and imitate his ways so that they would not have to receive the rod of discipline.

B. The Problem of Undisciplined Immorality: Paul directs the church to discipline a case of sexual immorality (5:1-13).

Chloe's second report concerns a case of incest in the church, a situation that had gone undisciplined. Instead of mourning and purification, they have become prideful in overlooking it (5:2). Paul's command is for them to put the man out of the fellowship of the church so that he might, by reaping the consequences of his sin, be renewed to repentance and delivered from further spiritual damage. A second benefit of the church would be its own purification (5:6-8). In a letter previously written to the church (5:9) Paul had taught on separation from the sexually immoral. Apparently this command had been misunderstood as referring to unbelievers; Paul takes occasion at this point to correct that misunderstanding (5:9-13). The church's purity is always a serious matter.

C. The Problem of Public Lawsuits: Paul condemns and corrects the practice of believers suing each other in secular courts (6:1-11).

Another manifestation of the divisive, contentious spirit that pervades the church is the, apparently regular, practice of litigation between believers. Paul condemns this as both unnecessary (6:2-5) and as a poor testimony (6:6). What's worse, instead of allowing themselves to be wronged in order to avoid disrepute to the name of Christ, they are actually guilty of wronging and defrauding fellow Christians (6:7-8). This type of behavior shows an utter disregard for the sanctity of Christian fellowship and a spiritual blindness to the true treasure of the kingdom of God. Those who pursue, through selfish ambition, the fleshly pleasures and earthly treasures of this life will forfeit treasure in the next (6:9-10). Membership in the kingdom is guaranteed by gift while inheritance is dependent upon service and character. But there is hope for the Corinthians, even in light of their background of pagan entanglement (6:11).

D. The Problem of Physical Impurity: Paul condemns the misuse of the body and counsels its use to the glory of God (6:12-20).

The problem of sexual laxity seems to have stemmed from a wrong view of the relationship of the Christian to his or her body. Though Paul affirms the principle of Christian liberty (in 6:12 the "all" is necessarily a restricted all) this cannot be extended to the sensual indulgence of the body, which must be what is behind the first statement in 6:13 ("Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods"). While the Christian is free to eat whatever he

may choose, he is not free to present his body to just any physical pleasure, especially of a sexual nature. The Christian's body belongs to the Lord who ought to be glorified through it through the believer's use of it. Since sexual immorality is a violation of God's design for marriage, it does not qualify as appropriate behavior. In fact, in some ways it is a worse type of sin than other body indulgences since it involves a degree of union with the sexual partner (6:15-18). Here, the temple refers to the individual Christian's body (in distinction to the way temple is used in 3:16-17). The great price of redemption makes it only right that the Christian use his or her body to glorify God (6:20).

III. On Questions Posed: Paul answers some questions posed by the church (7:1–11:1).

The two main items discussed in this section, marriage and idolatry, would have been key points of tension between the Christian and Corinthian culture. While the Christian faith is always at odds with native culture from a morality standpoint, in the case of Corinth there was even a more pronounced divergence. It is no wonder that the church had questions about how to be in the world but not of it (cf. 5:10). Paul's instruction is thoroughly biblical yet practically applicable, combining both divine prescript and personal, Spirit led, opinion (cf. 7:10, 12). The phrase "now concerning" (*peri de*) seems to mark off the various questions raised by the church (cf. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1). However, beginning at 11:1 the "now concerning" phrase seems to take on another nuance in that it introduces the idea of apostolic traditions.

A. Concerning Marriage: Paul instructs the church on God's will in marriage (7:1-40).

The first two questions (7:1, 25) deal with human sexuality and marriage. The influence of Greek philosophy no doubt had left its mark on Corinth with respect to how the spiritual related to the physical. Two extreme positions were represented in the Stoic and Epicurean systems of thought. The one held that since the material really didn't matter it made no difference what was done with (and in) the body. The other argued that the material/immaterial dichotomy necessitated a denial of the body, which led to a rigid asceticism. Both of these errors seem to be in the background of the Corinthian questions.

Paul counsels sexual abstinence for the single (7:2) but marriage as the norm with respect to avoiding immorality (7:2). Full conjugal rights and responsibilities are God's intent in marriage and should be practiced except on certain occasions (7:3-6), though Paul

thinks it best for those who can live righteously apart from marriage to remain single (7:7-9). The marriage vow is inviolable and should be honored even if one's mate is an unbeliever (7:10-16). If the unbelieving partner departs, the believer is not obligated to fulfill conjugal responsibilities, though such a situation is not to be allowed to degenerate into "domestic warfare" (7:15).³ Contentment in the state of God's calling is the best foundation from which to make decisions about marriage (7:17-24).

With respect to singleness, Paul counsels devotion to the Lord as the primary focus but couples this with freedom of choice (on part of parent and child) as to whether or not to marry (7:25-38). Finally, Paul comments on true widowhood, again permitting remarriage (to a believer) but advising one to remain single if possible (7:39-40). It is Paul's rigorous pursuit of life as a devoted disciple that informs his caution with respect to marriage, rather than some negative view of marriage itself.

B. Concerning Contact with Idolatry: Paul instructs on the proper exercise of Christian liberty (8:1-11:1).

Paul deals with idolatry and things offered to idols as it affects four areas: (1) the believer in his or her personal life (2) others in the body of Christ (3) the furtherance of the gospel and (4) the reputation of God. Freedom with respect to eating food offered to idols is maintained as the right of the believer since idols are really nothing (8:4-6). However, since some have a weak conscience in this area it is always right to restrict such freedom out of love for that weaker Christian (8:7-13).

In expounding on the freedom of the Christian, Paul uses himself as an example. Though he has certain rights as an apostle, in certain situations he has chosen to restrict or completely forego them for the sake of a more important objective, namely, the evangelization of the world (9:1-18). His passion was obedience to Christ through servanthood rather than a selfish pursuit of rights and privileges (9:19-23). It is this perspective that informed how he related to his own body in his pursuit of the imperishable crown of divine approval (9:24-27). Not that Paul was fearful of losing salvation. He simply did not want to be disqualified from approval at the judgment seat of Christ over the matter of physical delights

³ It is doubtful that this verse should be understood as validating remarriage after the desertion of an unbelieving partner. See William A. Heath and Gordon J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 140-44; J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1981), 82-89.

and pleasures (9:27).

Though things associated with idols (like meat) were not anything in and of themselves, there is, none the less, the danger of being overcome with the spirit of idolatry and the attitudes and habits that accompany such a mindset (like sexual immorality and murmuring—10:8, 10). Israel's experience in the wilderness becomes a graphic warning of just such a possibility (10:1-11). Evil desires will always present themselves, but the Christian has a way of escaping temptation (10:13). Idolatry must be avoided not only because of its detrimental affect on personal living, but also because it destroys fellowship with Christ (10:14-22). The Christian's devotion must be pure.

Paul's summary advice in response to the Corinthian believers' questions is to purpose to do everything to the glory of God, living with a clear conscience toward self and others so that God's person and plan may be exalted (10:23-32). Since this is how Paul, their spiritual father lived (cf. 4:15) in following his model, Jesus Christ, it is how they are to live as well (10:33–11:1).

IV. On Issues of Tradition: Paul instructs the church with regard to some received truths (11:2–15:58).

Though there are two more "now concerning" (*peri de*) constructions, which may indicate additional questions asked by the church (12:1; 16:1), a new feature is introduced at 11:2 that seems to mark this as the beginning of a new section. Paul commends them in this way: "you remember me in all things and keep the **traditions** (*parédoka*) as I **delivered** (*paradoseis*) them to you." "Tradition" and "deliver" are cognates in the Greek language. The "traditions" about which Paul is speaking, are those teachings and practices that he had received from the Lord and subsequently handed on to the churches. These were authoritative and binding pronouncements on certain things. This receiving and delivering is mentioned twice more in the final chapters of 1 Corinthians: at 11:23 with respect to the Lord's Supper, and at 15:1-3 with respect to the gospel. Along with the teaching on head coverings, these are the three main topics of discussion in the remainder of the book.

A. Paul commends the church for being observant of apostolic tradition (11:2).

Though this church causes him much grief, Paul does have things for which to praise it. They have made a serious attempt to abide by the practices and pronouncements of the new dispensation, things that the apostle of the new program of the ages has delivered to them.

B. Paul instructs on a practice involving the principle of headship (11:3-16).

The first “tradition” that Paul wishes to comment on has to do with the principle of headship. Several things must be noted with respect to this instruction. First, on the basis of structural considerations, this is most likely not part of the instruction on the meeting of the assembly; that begins at 11:17. Second, this instruction does not have to do with headship *per se* but with a certain representational activities upon which the principle of headship has bearing. The activities are leading in public prayer and the giving of a prophecy. Both of these activities are representational. One represents people to God (public, verbal prayer) the other represents God to people (prophecy, that is, divinely inspired utterance as God's mouthpiece). When standing before God in either of these representative roles certain protocol must be observed in order to reflect God's established administrative order. This protocol involves head covering for women and the absence of head covering for men. Other than this restriction of protocol, men and women seem to have equal privilege in these particular activities, though other factors may determine restriction with respect to the setting or occasion of such activities.⁴ The fact that this role distinction is based on the rationale of creation and the angels means that it is not simply a cultural concession. Nor does this instruction appear to refer to the gathering of the church, and thus does not violate the restriction with respect to women's participation in that meeting (14:34; 1 Tim. 2:11-12). Philip had daughters who prophesied, but presumably not in the meeting of the church (Acts 21:8). There were prayer meetings apart from the gathered church for the Lord's Supper. There is obviously a time when this apostolic protocol was to be applied. All interpretations must deal with these distinctions. Whatever the practice, Paul's instruction on this matter is the custom of all the churches (11:16).⁵

⁴ See, for example, 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-12. The issues of when and how to apply the various instructions with respect to men's and women's roles in ministry in the church age have been debated over the centuries. It is the conclusion of this author that these instructions are to be taken at face value as applicable to the church as a whole throughout the church age rather than being dismissed as a practice of deference to cultural situation at Corinth. However, this decision does not solve all the problems of when and where the head-covering is to be applied. Different groups have arrived at different ways of applying this apostolic tradition. While in some measure the practice of this apostolic tradition seems to be left up to the individual (cf. v. 16) the principle of submission to authority in the Body of Christ will play a role in this practice. A full exposition of this headship protocol is not possible in a work of this nature.

⁵ In support of this not referring to the church meeting see F. W. Grosheide, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953), 251–52. With regard to the cultural arguments cf. Bruce K. Waltke, “1 Corinthians 11:2–16: An Interpretation,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 48 (January-March 1978), 46-57 (though Waltke understands it as applying to the church meeting).

C. Paul instructs on the gathering of the church (11:17–14:40).

Indications are that this is a new section dealing with misbehavior at the Lord's Supper, the willed meeting of the apostolic church.⁶ The concept of “coming together as a church in one place” (combined in various ways in 11:18, 20 and 14:23, 26) forms an *inclusio* that sets off this section as involving one extended discussion. In it Paul addresses four issues.

1. In gathering, the church has been demeaning the Lord's Supper (11:17-34). The most serious infraction of the apostolic tradition of gathering is the demeaning of the centerpiece of the church gathered, namely, the Lord's Supper. Designed to be an act of worship and proclamation (11:23-26) the Lord's Supper had degenerated into an occasion for self-centered feasting (11:21). This is such a violation of the very spirit of the observance that it had resulted in the temporal judgments of weakness, illness and even death for many Corinthian believers (11:30). The Lord's body (the one that hung on a tree and the spiritual one of which the Corinthians were a part) needed to be respected and honored (11:27-29). Deference and consideration in personal relationships are key factors in such honor (11:33).

2. In gathering, the church is ignorant of the Spirit's ministry (12:1–13:13). The Corinthian church had been greatly gifted in verbal ability by the Spirit (cf. 1:5-7) but were using such gifts for self-edification rather than to build up the body of Christ. This prompts an extended discussion of the sovereignty of the Spirit in gifting and directing the body of Christ (12:1-30). The body has an amazing diversity with respect to spiritual gift. However it is still one body, the unity of which is of utmost importance. Gifts are not to be used to make boastful distinctions between members. Some gifts, to be sure, have greater relative importance in certain situations (like church meetings) but still they are not to be used in a self-serving fashion.

3. In gathering, the church is failing to pursue the more excellent way of love (13:1-13). To temper this tendency to overvalue gifts and undervalue individuals, Paul speaks of the more excellent way of love (13:1-13). After all, the gifts would eventually end, if not

⁶ Note the contrast between 11:2, which introduces both the whole last section and the first “tradition” and 11:17: “Now I praise you . . .” (11:2) versus “Now . . . I do not praise . . .” (11:17). Also note the repetition, beginning in 11:17, of the phrase “come together” (11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34; 14:23, 26) coupled with mention of the “church” (11:18; 14:4, 5, 12, 19, 23, 28, 33, 34, 35). The discussion of spiritual gifts (ch. 12) fits naturally into the assembled church context since the misuse of the speaking gifts was one of the issues in their gatherings.

with the coming of the Canon, then most certainly at the return of Christ. What would never lose its validity was faith, hope, and, above all, love (12:8-13).

4. In gathering, the church is ignoring the body's edification (14:1-40). The reason that prophecy is to be most highly valued in the church gathered, is because it alone could bring edification to all those present (14:1-19). The gift of tongues is actually intended as an evangelistic sign gift to Jewish unbelievers (14:20-25). Personal edification is only a by-product of the activity of speaking in tongues; it was never intended for a public ministry of edification (14:4). Since the Corinthians did possess the gift of tongues, Paul admits a way for it to be edifying, namely, as it is properly interpreted (14:13; 27-28). Disorderliness, in general, does not result in edification. This disorderliness is displayed not only in the undisciplined exercise of tongues (14:26-31), but also in the insubordinate verbal participation of women in the church meetings (14:34-35). This was the apostolic pattern that Paul had established in all the churches, and which is to be observed if the body is to be edified (14:36-40).

D. Paul instructs on the doctrine of the resurrection (15:1-58).

It had come to Paul's attention that some of the Corinthian believers did not believe in a resurrection of the dead (15:12). He sees this as a most serious problem and thus deals with it at length. Once again he appeals to what he had received and delivered to them (i.e., apostolic tradition—15:1-3). The resurrection of Christ is crucial to the gospel which they had received and in which they stand (15:1). It is in accordance with the Old Testament Scriptures and has been historically attested to by hundreds of believers (15:5-7) not the least of which is Paul himself (15:8). The transformation of Paul's life can only be explained by his encounter with the resurrection Lord (15:9-11).

The resurrection is absolutely crucial with respect to the individual's redemption from sin unto eternal life (15:12-19) and to the ultimate fulfillment of God's long awaited kingdom program (15:20-28). Denial of the resurrection flies full in the face of what so many had been willing to endure for the cause of Christ (15:29-34). Why would believers fill up the ranks of those saints who had already died if there were no resurrection? (15:29). In fact certainty of personal resurrection has an effect in the way a believer lives in time (15:33-34).

Perhaps the resurrection had been ridiculed as making no sense from a "scientific" standpoint (cf. 15:35). To this issue Paul directs his comments about the nature of the resurrection body (15:36-49). His conclusion is that a corruptible body cannot enter and dwell in

an incorruptible realm (15:50). This raises a logical question about what happens to those who are alive when the Lord returns. The answer is that their bodies will be changed without experiencing death and resurrection (15:51-57). The application of the truth of the resurrection is that believers are to be steadfast and to abound in the work of the Lord (15:58).

V. On a Promised Contribution: Paul admonishes the church to complete their ministry to the saints (16:1-4).

Perhaps in answer to a question about the collecting being made for the saints in Jerusalem, Paul gives orders to make their collections prior to his arrival. He also assures them that the transfer of funds will be above board.

VI. Conclusion: Paul's parting instructions reveals his commitment to their well-being and their importance to the Lord (16:5-24).

Despite all of the problems and the stern words that the apostle has had for the Corinthian church, Paul maintains his commitment to their spiritual development and reveals his intention to maintain personal contact with them (16:5-9). Paul's companions in ministry maintain the same attitude (16:10-12). These final remarks demonstrate that for Paul there are no second class members of the body of Christ. The Corinthian church is greeted and treated with all the respect afforded other assemblies (16:13-24). Though this positive perspective will soon be challenged, Paul will ultimately see his hopes for the Corinthian believers substantially realized (cf. 2 Corinthians).

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