

# Chapter Summary: 1 Corinthians

The people in the church at Corinth, a Greek city renowned for its immorality, were struggling. They were grateful to Paul for introducing them to Jesus, but now they were convinced they had moved beyond Paul in some key ways. The Corinthian community was deeply influenced by the Greco-Roman religious culture around them. Many of their ideas came from this cultural environment, which they were trying to integrate with their new Christian faith.

One set of ideas supposed a sharp divide between physical and spiritual realities, including the body and soul. It was thought that physical realities like the body were inherently evil while spiritual realities like the soul were good. In this heresy, the body and what was done in the body would have been considered insignificant; only the soul was important. This view, so different from the Bible's, went back many centuries to the philosopher Plato. It was still highly influential, as evidenced in a religious movement known as Gnosticism, which would become a major adversary to the early church.

Paul wrote this letter shortly after AD 50. After having stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, Paul had moved on to Ephesus, just across the Aegean Sea. The Corinthians took advantage of the short distance, corresponding with Paul about the problems facing their church.

So what was going on in Corinth? A lot, it turns out. They seemed to think that being "spiritual" meant being free from the bodies that trapped their spiritual selves. This led them to ask questions about marriage and sexual relations, including whether people should even bother to get married and have children. On another extreme, some boldly argued that certain actions done with the body had no effect on the soul. This included things like eating food sacrificed to idols and visiting prostitutes in pagan temples. Paul's teaching about the resurrection also raised questions for them. What was the point of the resurrection, where the soul would return to the body, if the physical body wasn't important or even good? And besides, how would that work? And what would those bodies be like?

The letter from the Corinthian believers to Paul provided him with plenty of questions to answer. But Paul had also learned from some friends who had visited Corinth that even more things were happening there. A man in the church was having sexual relations with his step-mother. The church had also divided into factions based on which famous teacher they liked most: Paul, Peter, or Apollos. The weekly worship gatherings were full of disorder, and believers with disputes were even taking one another to public court. In all, Paul would have to address twelve different problems in his letter.

We don't have the letter the Corinthians sent to Paul, but we do have this lengthy reply, now known as 1 Corinthians. (This was not the first letter Paul wrote to them; in this letter he mentions an earlier one that has not survived.)

Even with all their questions and problems, Paul addresses the Corinthian believers as God's own "holy people" and gives thanks for them. In the main body of his letter, he addresses all their questions as well as his own concerns, one by one.

While he writes about many different topics in his reply to the Corinthians, a basic correction is inherent in many of Paul's responses. For example, being spiritual doesn't mean being freed from the body; instead, it means living in the human body with a true appreciation that it is a gift from God. "Our bodies... were made for the Lord, and the Lord cares about our bodies," Paul insists. "Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God?... So you must honor God with your body."

Paul's stunning conclusion about the importance of the resurrection is crucial not only for the Corinthians but also for us today. The Good News about Jesus is built on the teaching of God's victory over death. Without the resurrection of Jesus, the faith of God's people is useless and they are still trapped by sin and its deadly consequences. But with it, believers know that God's renewal of the world has already begun in Jesus and that they will experience it fully in resurrected bodies at His return.