

INTRODUCTION

1. The city of Corinth

The city of Corinth, located in modern-day Greece, was situated at the base of the Acrocorinth, a summit that is nearly 2,000 ft (609 m) high. The city was strategically located, for it sat on the narrow strip of land between the Peloponnesus and the remainder of Greece. It was very near two ports which it controlled: Cenchreae to the east on the Saronic gulf (about 2 miles or 3 km) and Lechaenum to the north on the Corinthian gulf (about 6 miles or 10 km – Strabo, *Geogr.* 8.6.22). The Roman historian Strabo wrote,

Corinth is called ‘wealthy’ because of its commerce, since it is situated on the Isthmus and is master of two harbours, of which the one leads straight to Asia, and the other to Italy; and it makes easy the exchange of merchandise from both countries that are so far distant from each other (*Geogr.* 8.6.20).

Merchants often preferred taking the land route across the isthmus instead of testing the mercurial winds of Cape Maleae of the

Peloponnesus (Strabo, *Geogr.* 8.6.20). A 4-mile track cut out of the rock made it possible to transmit goods and cargo.

For our purposes it is important to recognize that the city was Roman. The significance of the Roman character of the city surfaces in the discussion of head-coverings (11:2–16) and of dining practices at the Lord's Supper (11:17–34). The Greek city was destroyed by Rome in 146 BC as the leading city of the Achaean league. Rome demanded the dissolution of the league, and Corinth was crushed for refusing to bend to Rome's will. The city was reestablished as a colony by Julius Caesar in 44 BC. It thus had a new lease of life, but it was clearly now a Roman city, though Greek influence continued to be felt. The new city was laid out like other Roman colonies, with four quadrants, and it was populated with people who were freedmen (Strabo, *Geogr.* 8.6.23; 17.3.15) and veterans. Others from Italy also came, and the city became prosperous, with a diverse population which also included Greeks, immigrants and Jews. It is clear from Acts 18:1–11 that at least one synagogue had been established in the city. The government of the city was Roman: two *duoviri* elected annually functioned as magistrates for the city.

The city attracted many because of its prosperity and the opportunity to flourish financially. It is estimated that the city had between 80,000 and 100,000 inhabitants; thus the city was a bustling place with commerce, with the worship of many gods, with theatre, athletics and other activities that characterized growing cities. The city was well known for the Isthmian Games which were held nearby every other year (Strabo, *Geogr.* 8.6.22). Paul likely alludes to these games in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27. Doubtless many people streamed into the city to see the games, just as we see in contemporary society.

At the same time, the city was stocked with all kinds of cults and gods. In Corinth we find temples for Apollo, Aphrodite, Poseidon, Asclepius, Demeter and Kore. Other gods played a prominent role as well. Magic was doubtless popular, and mystery cults abounded, including the worship of Isis and Sarapis. Nor should we neglect the presence of the imperial cult, for it also played a significant role. As a Roman city, Corinth was under the control of Rome and thus desired to show its devotion to the emperor. In the ancient world people did not choose one god over another. Instead, they would worship many deities, and did not believe that worshipping many

gods detracted from the honour of any god in particular. Pluralism was the cultural climate in which people lived, and thus Christians stood out because of their exclusive devotion to God and Jesus Christ. Paul verifies this claim in 1 Corinthians 8:5–6, for in a world that worshipped many gods and many lords, Christians were devoted to one God and to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jews, of course, were also known for their monotheism, but the fledgling Christian movement stood out because one could become a believer without adhering to the identity markers that separated Jews from Gentiles. In other words, circumcision, Sabbath and purity laws were not required for those who became Christians (7:18–19; 9:20–22). Believers, then, were out of step with the social and cultural foundations of both pagan and Jewish society.¹ The singularity of what it meant to be a Christian surfaces when we think of religious rites and institutions. Christians differed from both Jews and Gentiles; there were no temples, no priests and no sacrifices. Because of the alien nature of their religious commitments and their intense exclusivism, Christians were branded as atheists at least by AD 155–157 (see e.g. Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 1.6.1).² The distinctiveness of Christians made it tempting for the Corinthian Christians to compromise with the mores and the culture of the Roman world since there were costs to being outsiders. We see evidence of such compromise in 1 Corinthians.

Corinth, then, was a thriving city attracting those interested in business and profit. The city had rich and poor, free and slaves, and Gentiles and Jews. It is estimated that as many as one-third of those in the city were slaves. There was cut-throat competition, a keen desire to get ahead and all kinds of businesses to support a city that engaged in extensive trade. Certainly there were many prostitutes in

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1. For an excellent study on how believers were out of step with the culture of their day, see Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*.
 2. According to the *Acts of Peter*, Peter was crucified in Rome 'because of godlessness' (*Act. Verc.* 36). The same charge had been levelled against Jews from at least the first century BC; cf. Apollonius Molon, *apud Ap.* 2.148; also Pliny, *Nat. hist.* 13.46. My thanks to Schnabel for pointing these references out to me.

the city, though Strabo's claim (*Geogr.* 8.6.20) that there were a thousand prostitutes in the city describes old Corinth, not the newly reestablished Roman city. Still, we can scarcely doubt that there were plenty of prostitutes available. In many ways, Corinth was like major cities today, such as London or New York. The city was exciting and vibrant, but at the same time there were many who were poor and trampled on.

2. Paul and Corinth

Paul visited Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1–18). We can date Paul's arrival in the city on the basis of a letter of the Roman emperor Claudius, which relates to the accession of the proconsul L. Iunius Gallio, who was the brother of the famous Stoic Seneca. To say that Gallio was the proconsul means that he served as the governor of the province of Achaia, of which the city of Corinth was part. Paul faced charges from the Jews before Gallio (Acts 18:12–17), and thus we know he was in Corinth while Gallio served as the proconsul. Absolute certainty about the date is precluded, but Paul probably first evangelized Corinth in the spring of AD 50, staying for a year and a half until the autumn of AD 51 (see Table 1).

Table 1: 1 Corinthians timeline

| | |
|----------|--|
| 146 BC | Ancient Corinth destroyed in war with Rome |
| 44 BC | Corinth founded as a Roman colony |
| AD 50–51 | Paul spends 18 months in Corinth (Acts 18:11) |
| AD 51–52 | Gallio proconsul of Achaia (cf. Acts 18:12–17) |
| AD 54–55 | Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:8) |
| AD 55–56 | Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia (2 Cor. 7:5) |

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he joined up with Priscilla and Aquila, who played a significant role in the early Christian mission (Acts 18:1–3). In AD 49 Emperor Claudius had Jews who were involved in local disruptions on account of 'Chrestus' deported from Rome (Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4). Most scholars agree that Suetonius confused the word *Christos* (lat. *Christus*), the Greek/Latin transliteration for Hebrew *mašiah* ('Messiah'), with the name *Chresto*,

the latter being a common Greek name. Suetonius may not have known about the 'Christ', and thus the reason for the mistake is easily comprehensible. It was as a result of these disturbances, which were evidently caused by the missionary outreach of Jewish Christians in the city of Rome, that Claudius banished some Jews from Rome,³ and Priscilla and Aquila were included in this expulsion. They were remarkably involved in the missionary enterprise, for elsewhere we find them in Rome (Rom. 16:3–5) and Ephesus (2 Tim. 4:19). Paul worked with them in Corinth since they practised the same trade. They were tentmakers, which probably means they were leatherworkers. Since Paul quickly linked up with Priscilla and Aquila when he came to Corinth, and since they were expelled from Rome over debates about Christ, they were probably already Christians when Paul met them. Indeed, Luke says nothing about their being converted by Paul. It is possible that a few people had become believers in Corinth through the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila before Paul arrived, but, since nothing is said about this, it is more likely that the church was founded by Paul, and this fits with the evidence of 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 2:1–5; 3:6).

On Sabbath days Paul proclaimed the gospel in the synagogue, 'trying to persuade Jews and Greeks' (Acts 18:4). By 'Greeks' Luke almost certainly means Gentiles in general, and these Gentiles probably included many 'God-fearers' who were attracted by the ethics and theology propounded in the synagogue, though they had not become proselytes because they were not willing to be circumcised. We note, for instance, that Paul, after leaving the synagogue, set up operations in the house of Titius Justus, who is described as a 'worshipper of God' (*sebomenou ton theon*, Acts 18:7). When Timothy and Silas landed in Corinth, having come from Macedonia, Paul was free to devote himself exclusively to the proclamation of the gospel (Acts 18:5). Opposition sprang up in the synagogue, presumably because Paul preached that Jesus the crucified one was risen from the dead and exalted to God's right hand, and hence was the promised Messiah and Saviour. Perhaps the charge of blasphemy was also brought since Paul taught that salvation did not come via works of

3. The word 'all' in Acts 18:2 is probably hyperbolic.

law but through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:27–28). In any case, Paul departed from the synagogue and began to proclaim the gospel to Gentiles in a house next door to the synagogue (Acts 18:6–7).

Paul seems to have had particular success among Gentiles, for, when reading 1 Corinthians, it seems that most of the congregation was composed of Gentiles. The sins that characterized them before conversion were typical of Gentiles (1 Cor. 6:9–11), and the blatant sexual immorality in the congregation (1 Cor. 5:1–13; 6:12–20) also attests to Gentile influence. Along the same lines, Paul conveys the experience Gentiles had with food offered to idols (1 Cor. 8:7–13). The congregation, then, was probably mainly Gentile, although there were certainly Jews present as well. We read in Acts 18:8 that ‘Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord’. Paul also mentions the conversion and baptism of Gaius (1 Cor. 1:14) and the household of Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:16; 16:15). The Gaius named here is the same person mentioned in Romans 16:23 who is the host of the church, which probably means that he furnished hospitality for travelling believers. Some maintain that Gaius is the same person as Titius Justus (Acts 18:7), but we cannot be sure of this identification.

Apparently, Paul enjoyed significant success in Corinth, though opposition dogged him there as it did everywhere he proclaimed the gospel. The Lord appeared to Paul in a vision, encouraging him to continue to proclaim the good news about Jesus in the city and promising him that he would be spared from harm. The presence of many converts is attested by the Lord’s words to Paul: ‘I have many people in this city’ (Acts 18:10). These words assured Paul that his missionary work would be successful. Paul responded by staying a year and a half in the city, which was quite a long stay for the apostle. We can understand why he remained for a longer period of time if the response to his preaching was positive, and Corinth was a strategic city with people from all over the Graeco-Roman world travelling to it for various reasons.

The Lord’s promise that Paul would be protected from harm became a reality in Acts 18:12–17. The Jews in Corinth brought charges against Paul before the proconsul Gallio, presumably hoping to establish a sharp distinction between this new messianic movement and traditional Jewish faith. The charges were likely brought

at the inception of Gallio's rule and thus can probably be dated to AD 51. The Jewish leaders wanted Gallio to rule that the new faith was contrary to the Roman law, which would doubtless have had a significant impact on the spread of the Christian faith. We do not know the exact charges that were made against Paul. Perhaps they claimed that his message was anti-imperial (Acts 17:7) or that Paul was a trouble-maker. Whatever the case, Gallio, disgusted and annoyed by what he viewed as an intra-Jewish squabble, banished the Jews from his presence. Gallio recognized that the accusations had nothing to do with the security and order of the city but stemmed from animus and intra-Jewish disagreements.

Bystanders used the opportunity to attack Sosthenes as the ruler of the synagogue (Acts 18:17). Were those who beat him Jews or Gentiles? We do not know for certain, and a good case can be made for either. Perhaps the Jews turned on Sosthenes because they felt he had not handled the legal situation well and was secretly supportive of Paul. On the other hand, if Jews were beating Jews, why did they not turn on Paul? Perhaps they knew Paul was a Roman citizen, a fact which would protect him from physical harm during his investigation by the proconsul.⁴ It is also possible that this was an anti-Semitic incident when Gentiles felt free to vent their anger on the Jewish leader. Incidentally, we do not know whether this person is the same Sosthenes mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:1; if he is, then, like the earlier ruler of the synagogue, Crispus, he ended up becoming a believer in Jesus the Christ.

As noted above, the account in Acts indicates that Paul enjoyed significant evangelistic success in Corinth. His converts were from the upper and lower classes, both the rich and the poor (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26). Scholars have disputed whether the congregation was mainly lower or upper class. Most would agree that the congregation was socially diverse but comprised mainly those who belonged to the lower class. Still, the presence of some from the upper class is attested by the desire for wisdom which, it will be argued, was tied to prizing Greek rhetoric (cf. 1 Cor. 2:1–5). In the same vein, it was the rich who could afford lawsuits (6:1–11), who ate sumptuously

4. Suggested by Eckhard Schnabel as editor.

at the Lord's Supper and who ignored the hunger of the poor at the same meal (11:17–34). Perhaps the congregation overlooked the man committing incest because he was wealthy as well (5:1–13). We already noted the presence of Gaius, who was doubtless wealthy since he served as the host for those who travelled (Rom. 16:23). Paul almost certainly wrote Romans from Corinth, and we see in that letter the presence of another well-off person, Erastus, who is identified as the 'city's director of public works' (Rom. 16:23, *ho oikonomos tēs poleōs*). There is debate over whether he is to be equated with the Erastus named in a famous inscription for having paved a square in Corinth at his own expense. The name Erastus is relatively infrequent, which supports the claim that the Erastus from the inscription is intended. It is also difficult to be certain what the phrase *ho oikonomos tēs poleōs* means. Some argue that Erastus was an aedile (public works magistrate), while other scholars think he was a *quaestor* (treasury magistrate). We must be content with uncertainty, since the evidence is not comprehensive enough to draw definite conclusions, but, in any case, he was doubtless part of the elite class of the city. Certainly others were well off, including the household of Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:16; 16:15–17) and the household of Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11).

3. The occasion for the letter

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus before the feast of Pentecost (1 Cor. 16:8), and he probably wrote it in the spring of AD 54, though AD 55 is also possible. Paul desired to spend considerable time with the Corinthians in the near future, but in the meantime he had sent Timothy to minister on his behalf (16:5–11). Timothy was sent to communicate the Pauline 'ways' to the church (4:17), which means he would relay Paul's teaching and moral instruction on certain matters. Perhaps Paul hoped that Timothy could resolve some of the problems troubling the church, but upon hearing reports about the state of the church from Chloe's people and from Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus, he sent the letter that we call 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:11; 16:15–17). As Paul was about to send the letter, he also urged Apollos to visit, but Apollos, for reasons unknown to us, did not believe it was an opportune time for him to make the trip (16:12).

Paul's desire for Apollos to visit makes it plain that the quarrels in the church over Apollos (cf. 1:12; 3:4–6, 22; 4:6) were entirely the fault of the Corinthians. Paul did not hold Apollos responsible for the fissures in the community. Neither did Paul think Apollos's theology was deficient. Paul would have scarcely wanted Apollos to return to Corinth if his theology were part of the problem!

After Paul had established the Corinthian church, he continued his missionary work. He travelled back to Syria and then launched his third missionary journey, strengthening disciples along the way (Acts 18:22–23). Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, as noted above, when he was in Ephesus (Acts 19). Sometime in the interval between AD 51 and AD 54, and before 1 Corinthians was written, Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians that is now lost (1 Cor. 5:9). In it he instructed the Corinthians not to associate with those who lived sexually immoral lives, but the Corinthians misunderstood Paul's instructions, taking him to say that they should not associate with unbelievers who were sexually immoral. Paul explains in the letter we label 1 Corinthians that the readers had misinterpreted his intention. By referring to those who were sexually immoral, he meant those who were part of the believing community and were sexually immoral, for it is not the role of the church to judge those in the world.

The question of Paul's letters to the Corinthians and their relationship is complex, the subject of much scholarly dispute and discussion (see Table 2 below). Such matters are particularly important in discussing 2 Corinthians.⁵

Table 2: Paul's letters to the Corinthians

| | |
|---|---|
| Letter before 1 Corinthians 1 Corinthians | 'my letter' (1 Cor. 5:9) |
| Letter between 1 and 2 Corinthians 2 Corinthians | 'I wrote to you' (2 Cor. 2:4) The minority view identifies this letter as 1 Corinthians |

5. For a careful analysis of these matters, see Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 36–46.

The writing of 1 Corinthians was stimulated by a letter received from the Corinthians and by the reports Paul heard about the state of the church. We know from 1 Corinthians 7:1 that the Corinthians addressed a letter to Paul. The words *peri de*, usually rendered by the NIV as ‘now about’,⁶ are often taken to refer to various questions the Corinthians asked Paul. We find the phrase in 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12 (see Table 3 below). Hence, many claim that Paul answers questions here about marriage (7:1–24); virgins (7:25–40); food offered to idols (8:1 – 11:1); spiritual gifts (12:1 – 14:40); the collection (16:1–4); and perhaps Apollos (16:12). Margaret Mitchell has shown, however, that *peri de* does not clearly designate questions raised by the Corinthians; the phrase may simply introduce a new topic for consideration.⁷ Given Mitchell’s study, we cannot be certain whether the phrase ‘now about’ (*peri de*) reflects questions asked by the Corinthians or it simply designates a shift to a new subject matter.

Table 3: ‘Now about’ in 1 Corinthians

| ‘Now about . . .’ | |
|-----------------------|--------------|
| Marriage | 7:1–24 |
| Virgins | 7:25–40 |
| Food offered to idols | 8:1 – 11:1 |
| Spiritual gifts | 12:1 – 14:40 |
| Apollos | 16:12 |

Despite Mitchell’s excellent study, it is still possible that the phrase ‘now about’ reflects questions asked by the Corinthians. Perhaps the exception is the reference to Apollos (16:12), for it is not apparent that the Corinthians posed a question about his coming. On the other hand, it makes sense that the Corinthians might have asked questions about marriage (7:1–24), what to do if one is engaged to a virgin (7:25–40), food offered to idols (8:1 – 11:1), spiritual gifts (12:1 – 14:40) and the collection (16:1–4). Paul

6. The NIV renders the phrase as ‘now about’ except in 7:1, where it is translated ‘Now’.

7. Mitchell, ‘Concerning *peri de* in 1 Corinthians’.

does not mention a Corinthian letter until 7:1, and all the ‘now about’ phrases are subsequent to this reference to the letter from the church. This does not prove, of course, that the phrase refers to questions from a Corinthian letter. In the commentary I will treat the ‘now about’ phrases as answers to questions, but the interpretation offered does not depend on such a reconstruction.

Paul also addresses a number of areas of conflict in the letter. Apparently, he received reports from Chloe’s household about divisions in the church (1:10 – 4:21), and he also received a report about behaviour at the Lord’s Supper (11:17–34). Presumably the matters concerning incest (5:1–13), lawsuits (6:1–11) and sexual immorality (6:12–20) were also reported to Paul. It is difficult to be certain whether the issue of head-coverings (11:2–16) and questions about the resurrection (15:1–58) were reported to Paul, for they could have been included in the letter as well. I incline to the view that these latter two issues were reported to Paul (see Table 4 below).

Table 4: Reports about the Corinthians

| Reports about . . . | |
|--------------------------------|-------------|
| Divisions | 1:10 – 4:21 |
| Incest | 5:1–13 |
| Lawsuits | 6:1–11 |
| Sexual immorality | 6:12–20 |
| Adornment of women | 11:2–16 |
| Behaviour at the Lord’s Supper | 11:17–34 |
| The resurrection | 15:1–58 |

Perhaps information about all these matters came from Chloe’s household. On the other hand, it is also possible that Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus, who came to visit Paul, informed him about some of these matters (1 Cor. 16:17). It is conceivable as well that he received some information from Sosthenes (1:1), Crispus and Gaius (1:14), Apollos (16:12), and Aquila and Priscilla (16:19).

Eckhard Schnabel observes that the themes in the letter can be examined in terms of conflict and compromise, and that these

two major themes receive almost equal attention (see Table 5 below).⁸

Table 5: Conflict and compromise in Corinth

| Conflict situations | |
|------------------------------|--------------|
| Divisions | 1:10 – 4:21 |
| Lawsuits | 6:1–11 |
| Lord's Supper | 11:17–34 |
| Spiritual gifts | 12:1 – 14:40 |
| Apollos | 16:12–14 |
| Stephanas and his co-workers | 16:15–18 |
| Compromise situations | |
| Incest | 5:1–13 |
| Sexual sin | 6:12–20 |
| Marriage | 7:1–24 |
| Virgins | 7:25–40 |
| Food offered to idols | 8:1 – 11:1 |
| Head-coverings | 11:2–16 |
| The resurrection | 15:1–58 |

Schnabel also rightly argues that the theme of the book is not unity, nor is it holiness: unity is the antidote to conflict, and holiness is the cure for compromise. All the themes broached in the book have to be read against the horizon of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the grace of God which is granted to believers.⁹ Every area of dispute and every matter dividing believers must be recalibrated and rethought, and lived out in the light of the truth that Jesus Christ is the crucified and risen Lord.

Scholars have also discussed in great detail the specific situation in the church that called forth the letter. A number of proposals have been suggested, but here I mention those that have been most influential. First, F. C. Baur argued in 1831 that the letter reflects a

8. Schnabel, p. 33, following Winter, 'Conflict and Compromise'.

9. Schnabel, pp. 48–53.

sharp division between Peter and Paul (1:12).¹⁰ The Pauline party, according to Baur, lived free from the law, while the Peter party was a Judaizing party that resisted the freedom of the Pauline gospel. Many scholars followed Baur's reconstruction in the 1800s and even in the early 1900s, and the division Baur saw between Pauline and Petrine Christianity still influences scholarship today. The theory, however, is flawed, and recent scholarship on 1 Corinthians has disagreed with such a reconstruction.

We will see in the exegesis of 1:10 – 4:21 that the divisions in the church cannot be traced to Paul, Apollos or Peter. The fault lies entirely at the feet of the congregation. Nor can the claim that Peter had a Judaizing tendency be substantiated. Later in the letter Paul recounts the appearance of the risen Christ to Peter (15:5), and a few verses later he proceeds to say that Peter and the others named in 15:5–7 proclaim the same gospel. Paul concludes his discussion on the gospel and on the resurrection appearances of Christ by saying, 'Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed' (15:11). Paul does not breathe a word about preaching a different gospel, but instead insists that he and Peter proclaim the same gospel. Nor is there any polemic against the law in 1 Corinthians, such as we see in Galatians. Instead, Paul says that one should live by the law when one is with Jews, even though believers in Christ are not under the law (9:20). When circumcision comes up, Paul does not engage in strong polemic (7:18–19). Indeed, he emphasizes that it is inconsequential whether one is circumcised or uncircumcised, and thus those who are circumcised should not go to the trouble of removing the marks of circumcision. The notion that 1 Corinthians reflects a theological controversy with Peter over the law should be rejected.

Another theory that once exerted significant influence is that the opposition in Corinth was Gnostic. Those who see Gnostic influence or a gnosticizing trajectory point to Paul's frequent use of words like 'wisdom' and 'knowledge'. The reference to those who are 'mature' (*teleioi*, which could be translated as 'perfect') in 2:6–16 could also support the idea that there is a spiritual elite, which fits

10. Baur, *Paul the Apostle*.

Gnostic or even gnosticizing thought. Gnostic dualism can be adduced to explain the sexual libertinism and the asceticism in the congregation and the denial of the bodily resurrection. Seeing Gnosticism behind the New Testament letters was once a very popular enterprise, but few scholars find the Gnostic theory convincing today. Full-blown Gnosticism was a second-century phenomenon and it should not be read into the New Testament. Nor is it warranted to posit incipient Gnosticism behind what we see in Corinth. We would need much more detailed evidence to support any kind of Gnostic hypothesis. Sexual immorality and asceticism are not unique to Gnosticism, and Greeks and Romans found the notion of the resurrection of the body philosophically untenable. The references to wisdom and knowledge do not clearly issue from a Gnostic worldview. We shall see in the commentary that the issue here centres on Greek rhetoric, not Gnosticism. Most scholars now recognize that we cannot take a few features of the letter and then force them into a Gnostic mould.

Another popular reading is that Paul opposes the over-realized eschatology of his readers. Evidence for over-realized eschatology is seen in the denial of the resurrection of the body (15:1–58), in the claim that they already live as kings (4:8) and in the so-called heavenly existence which they experience when speaking in tongues (12:1–14:40). Such a reading is quite attractive at many levels, but this view is also receding in recent scholarship. The divisions (1:10–4:21), incest (5:1–13), lawsuits (6:1–11), sexual sin (6:12–20), dispute over food offered to idols (8:1–11:1) and quarrelling at the Lord's Supper (11:17–34) do not relate clearly to over-realized eschatology. Huge swathes of the letter, in other words, do not seem to have anything to do with over-realized eschatology. The matters which are interpreted in terms of over-realized eschatology can be explained on other terms, and to this I now turn.

The best explanation for the problems in Corinth is that the church was affected by the secular world, by the paganism and worldliness that was endemic in Corinth. Some posit a significant influence of the imperial cult, and this is certainly possible, but the evidence that the imperial cult played a major role in 1 Corinthians is unpersuasive. Scholars typically read between the lines to see a polemic against Caesar, but the danger is that they read into the text

matters that are not present. The overt paganism Paul worries about in the letter surfaces in the matter of food offered to idols (8:1 – 11:1), but we do not have the same evidence that the Corinthians were compromising with the imperial cult.

What we do see is that the Corinthians were inclined to throw in their lot with the values and culture of secular society.¹¹ For instance, the church was divided over various ministers (1:10 – 4:21) since they had imbibed the values of the Graeco-Roman world where itinerant speakers entranced crowds with their rhetorical artistry. The Corinthians evaluated Paul and Apollos on the basis of their rhetorical abilities and estimated the wisdom of Paul and Apollos accordingly. The fundamental problem with the congregation was pride and worldliness. We can think of churches today that assess speakers in terms of their ability to excite and entertain people and draw a crowd, instead of focusing on the content of what is said. The blatant secularism of the Corinthians also led them to tolerate incest (5:1–13). We do not know why they were so lax about a matter which even pagans agreed was detestable. The best guess is that they did not address the sin in their congregation because the man indulging in incest was wealthy. The Corinthians (or at least a good number of them) were certainly attracted to the rich, to the upper class, and to those who exercised power in society (cf. 1:26; 4:6–13). Their selfishness and grasping after wealth also manifested itself in the lawsuits which plagued the community (6:1–11), by which members of the church sued fellow-members over trivial matters.

Worldliness was also evident in sexual immorality (6:12–20). One does not have to be gnostic or believe in over-realized eschatology to visit a prostitute! Christians fell into such sins when they conformed to the world (Rom. 12:2), when the values of a society that proclaimed sexual freedom wormed their way inside the church. In the same way, failure to live faithfully or with contentment in one's

11. Perhaps they were especially influenced by Stoicism (Brookins, *Corinthian Wisdom*). Probably much of their thinking at the popular level may be attributed to Stoic thought, but it is quite unlikely that the congregation, which consisted mainly of the lower class, embraced Stoicism in a formal or systematic way.

marriage or in one's station in life is typical among those who are filled with a desire to advance in society (7:1–40). Paul reminds the Corinthians of eschatology (7:29–31); the way believers relate to everything in the world has changed now that Jesus Christ has come, for the end of the ages has come (10:11).

We see the same worldly spirit in the desire to eat food offered to idols (8:1 – 11:1), which was universally condemned by Christians and Jews in the ancient world since it was considered to be tantamount to idolatry. Presumably, the Corinthians desired to eat in pagan temples because if they abstained they would face social discrimination and lose status in society. The refusal of the women to abide by social norms (11:2–16) was also quite scandalous and represented a rebellious spirit that accorded with the spirit of the world instead of the Spirit of God. The selfishness of the rich at the Lord's Supper reflected the mores of Roman society whereby the rich ate sumptuous meals while the poor got by on what they could (11:17–34). In this respect, the Corinthians did not look any different from the society which they inhabited. Their pride in their spiritual gifts displayed a lack of love and a self-absorption which denied the message of the cross, for Jesus' death demonstrated his concern and love for others (12:1 – 14:40). Finally, the refusal to believe in the bodily resurrection reflected the typical Greek view that the body was to be despised (15:1–58).

The first letter to the Corinthians speaks to us today because the problems addressed still afflict us. Believers are tempted to fawn on the rich, to hobnob with the elite, to curry favour with the powerful and to acclaim intellectuals. Divisions arise because of stubborn pride which represents the exaltation of self. At the same time, sexual sin, whereby the desires of the body are pursued, compromise the holiness of the church. When our doctrines are adjusted to fit the society we live in and our spiritual gifts become a barometer of our spirituality, we see that the errors of the Corinthians are still with us today.

4. The nature of the letter

Some scholars in the history of interpretation have questioned the unity of 1 Corinthians. A number of different proposals have been

offered which attempt to delineate the previous history of the letter that is now identified as 1 Corinthians. In other words, according to these theories, our present 1 Corinthians was composed of a number of different letters (scholars propose between two and five different letters). Such theories fail to convince for a variety of reasons.

First, the only evidence we have is that 1 Corinthians consists of the one letter we have today. Scholars may speculate about a pre-history in which the letter existed in a different form (actually, different forms!), but the burden of proof is on those who say that the letter is not a unity since the hard evidence, the textual evidence, says otherwise. To put it another way, the notion that the letter has been stitched together from a number of letters is speculative.

Second, we must recognize that sections of the letter that seem to interrupt the flow of thought (such as Paul's right to receive pay [9:1–27] in the midst of a discussion of food offered to idols [8:1–13; 10:1 – 11:1], or the discussion on love [13:1–13] in the midst of a disputation on spiritual gifts [12:1–31; 14:1–40]) are intentional. Some critics are flat-footed and betray a lack of literary sensibility in interpreting texts, for they fail to see that Paul interleaves particular content for a reason.

Third, Paul does not always write his letters in the neat and orderly way we might expect. We can think of how he bursts forth in Galatians 2:3–5 with a passage that does not quite fit grammatically, but anyone who reads the letter knows exactly what Paul is doing and the sudden irruption into the argument makes perfect sense.

When we examine the content of 1 Corinthians, it is actually rather easy to divide up into major sections. The letter is quite well organized. I suggest the major sections shown in Table 6 overleaf.

In recent years Paul's letters have been investigated from the standpoint of rhetorical criticism, and 1 Corinthians is no exception.¹² Did Paul use the patterns of argumentation and structure recommended in the Graeco-Roman handbooks, especially in the works of Quintilian and Cicero? A number of scholars classify Paul's letters as rhetorical compositions. Rhetoric can be classified

12. The material on rhetorical criticism comes (with some changes) from Schreiner, 'Interpreting', pp. 414–415, 422–423.

Table 6: Topics in 1 Corinthians

| | |
|--------------------------------|--------------|
| Introduction | 1:1–9 |
| Divisions | 1:10 – 4:21 |
| Incest | 5:1–13 |
| Lawsuits | 6:1–11 |
| Sexual immorality | 6:12–20 |
| Marriage | 7:1–24 |
| Virgins | 7:25–40 |
| Food offered to idols | 8:1 – 11:1 |
| Women's adornment | 11:2–16 |
| Behaviour at the Lord's Supper | 11:17–34 |
| Spiritual gifts | 12:1 – 14:40 |
| The resurrection | 15:1–58 |
| The collection | 16:1–4 |
| Closing | 16:5–24 |

into three types: (1) judicial; (2) deliberative; and (3) epideictic. Judicial rhetoric is the language of the law court where language of defence and accusation predominates, and guilt and innocence are under consideration. Deliberative rhetoric summons human beings to consider the future, seeking to persuade or dissuade them from a certain course of action. When speakers use epideictic rhetoric, they celebrate common values or aspirations, or indict something that is blameworthy. Most rhetorical speeches have four elements: (1) the *exordium* (introduction), which introduces the speech and attempts to create empathy for what will follow; (2) the *narratio* (narration), which contains the main proposition and background information relevant to the argument; (3) the *probatio* (proofs to defend the main thesis) in which the arguments for the proposition are set forth; and (4) the *peroratio* (summary and conclusion), in which the whole argument is summarized and brought to a ringing conclusion so that the hearers will be persuaded.

I am not convinced that Paul's letters are structured by the canons of Greek rhetoric. We do see in the letters, especially in the opening (1:1–9) and closing (16:5–24) of 1 Corinthians, conventions that are typical in epistolary literature. And those who see 1 Corinthians as patterned after Greek rhetoric remind us that the Pauline letters are

carefully structured and crafted, for scholars would not even consider whether the letter accorded with Greek rhetoric if Paul's letters were organized haphazardly. Surely, Paul was familiar with rhetoric to some extent, for he was an educated person, and the impact of Hellenism was evident even in Palestine. Still, it is doubtful whether Paul actually structured entire letters in accordance with the rhetorical handbooks. We see in 1 Corinthians 1:18 – 2:5 his reluctance to use rhetoric since people would then rely on the wisdom of people rather than the power of God. Furthermore, the rules of rhetoric were designed for *speeches*, not for written discourse. Rhetorical handbooks rarely refer to *letters*, and they do not contain instructions in terms of the type of argument employed (judicial, deliberative or epideictic), nor do they recommend the following of a certain outline (*exordium, narratio, probatio, peroratio*). Stanley Porter rightly concludes his study of the impact of the rhetorical handbooks upon letters by saying, "There is, therefore, little if any theoretical justification in the ancient handbooks for application of the formal categories of the species and organization of rhetoric to analysis of the Pauline epistles."¹³ It is also instructive that early Church Fathers did not identify the Pauline letters as conforming to Greek rhetoric.¹⁴ A number of the Fathers were familiar with or trained in rhetoric, and yet they do not give any indication that they understood Paul's letters to be patterned after such rhetoric. If anything, they sometimes seemed embarrassed by what they saw as the rudeness of his style. Indeed, when one examines commentaries on the letter that see a rhetorical scheme, they do not agree on the major rhetorical sections in the book, which strengthens the notion that Paul did not construct the letter using rhetorical categories.

Paul's letters were pastoral in nature, and it has often been said that they substitute for his personal presence.¹⁵ They are not merely personal letters, as Adolf Deissman thought,¹⁶ but represent

13. Porter, 'Application of Rhetorical Categories', pp. 115–116.

14. Cf. Weima, 'What Does Aristotle?', p. 467.

15. See Weima, *Paul the Ancient Letter Writer*.

16. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, pp. 228–241; and Deissmann, *Bible Studies*, pp. 3–59.

authoritative instructions for the churches or persons addressed. Paul wrote them as an apostle of Jesus Christ, and he expected them to be read in the churches and obeyed (1 Cor. 14:37; 1 Thess. 5:27; 2 Thess. 3:14). The authority of the Pauline letters is communicated by the admonition to public reading. In the synagogue the Old Testament Scriptures were read aloud, and Paul expects *his letters* to be read and his admonitions to be heeded. It is instructive as well that the Colossians were enjoined to pass his letter on to the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16). Even though Colossians was addressed to specific circumstances in that church, Paul believed it would be useful to the Laodiceans as well, demonstrating that his instructions had a significance that transcended local circumstances. This is not surprising because Paul believed his instructions in the letters were authoritative (Gal. 1:8; 1 Cor. 14:37). His letters were not merely good advice but were part of the gospel (cf. 1 Thess. 2:13). Thus, Deissmann underestimates the authoritative status of the Pauline letters and the extent to which letters addressed to one church could also apply to another.

In interpreting 1 Corinthians, we should pay special attention to how Paul develops his argument in the letter. Paul's letters have a uniqueness, and thus we must always attend to the letter itself instead of preformed theories about how the letter functions. The letter can be identified as broadly parenetic and deliberative. In other words, the letter consists of exhortations designed to persuade the readers.

5. Major theological themes

a. God the Father

God, who is identified as the Father (1:3; 8:6; 15:24), plays a prominent role in the letter. Paul evokes the famous Shema (Deut. 6:4) in a confessional statement which asserts that there is one God, the Father, and that he is the creator of all things (8:6; cf. 8:4). God is the head of Christ (11:3), which should not be construed to say that Christ does not share the same authority, power and dignity as the first person of the Trinity. As creator, God is the sovereign one, and hence Paul speaks of God's kingdom on five occasions (4:20; 6:9, 10; 15:24, 50). The theme of God's sovereign

power permeates the letter. By his great power he raised Christ from the dead (15:15). Paul became an apostle by God's will and grace (1:1; 3:10), salvation is the result of his power (1:18), and God frustrates and brings to nothing 'the wisdom of the world' (1:20–21). The extent of God's sovereignty is evident in that even the suffering experienced by apostles is not outside God's control; in fact, God has appointed them to suffer (4:9). God rules over all of life (11:12), so whether one is single or married also stems from him (7:7).

God grants salvation and life to human beings. He is the source of grace and peace (1:3, 4; 15:10) and effectively called the Corinthians to faith in Jesus Christ (1:24–28). Salvation is not ultimately due to human free will, but is granted by virtue of the electing grace of God (1:27–28), and thus it is by God's choice that people are in Christ (1:30). God saves human beings through the foolish message of the cross to scuttle the wisdom of human beings and to exalt the wisdom of God (1:18–25). Similarly, God has chosen to disclose the truth about himself through the Holy Spirit, and thus knowledge about God cannot be ascribed to the human intellect or human achievement (2:6–16). God is faithful to those whom he has called and will preserve them until the end (1:9; 10:13).

The station one occupies in life is due to God's call (7:17, 20, 24), and the gifts one exercises are due to his will (12:6, 18, 24, 28). The church grows by virtue of God's strength (3:6–7), and is regularly said to be God's church (1:2; 10:32; 11:22; 15:9). The almightiness of God is revealed in his judgment. He wiped out the wilderness generation which refused to trust him or obey him (10:5). He will also destroy those who destroy his temple (3:17) and will judge unbelievers on the last day (5:13). He is a jealous God and must not be trifled with; those who worship idols will not be spared from his wrath (10:14–22). On the other hand, he will raise believers by his power from the dead and transform their bodies on the last day (6:13–14) and will give them a resurrection body (15:38). Since God is both creator and redeemer, he deserves the love of human beings (8:3) and all glory, honour, thanks and praise; and giving this is the highest duty of human beings (6:20; 10:31; 11:7; 14:18, 25). Ultimately, God will be all in all, and all things shall be subjected to him (15:27–28).

b. Jesus Christ

Paul's theology is Christ-centred, and the uniqueness of Jesus manifests itself in 1 Corinthians. One of the most significant statements about Jesus in all of Paul's letters is found in 1 Corinthians 8:6. The appeal in the verse to the oneness of God confirms that Paul draws on the Shema (Deut. 6:4). Remarkably, however, Paul sees complexity in the oneness of God, since he does not restrict himself to the Father but also includes Jesus Christ as Lord. The attribution 'Lord' (*kyrios*) does not mean that Jesus Christ is at a lower level than the Father. Indeed, Paul specifically says Jesus is the agent of creation and of human beings. No creature has the capacity to be the agent of creation. Hence, Paul, as Richard Bauckham has said, includes Jesus in the identity of God.¹⁷ Both the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds quarried verses like this to support the notion of distinct personal relations between the Father and the Son. In other words, they share the same essence as God *ad intra*, but they have different functions in that the Father carries out his work *through* the Son. It is also instructive to consider 1 Corinthians 12:4–6, where we find a reference to the Spirit, the Lord Jesus and God the Father relative to spiritual gifts. Paul does not enunciate a doctrine of the Trinity, but he clearly puts the Spirit, the Lord and the Father on the same level.

One of the most astonishing features of Paul's theology is the high stature of Christ, given the monotheism of the Old Testament in which Paul was nurtured from his youngest years. We see, for instance, that Paul says that the 'rock was Christ' (10:4). The meaning of this verse is disputed, but Paul almost certainly draws upon the Old Testament theme that God is the rock (cf. Gen. 49:24; Deut. 32:4, 15, 18, 30, 31; 2 Sam. 22:32, 47; 23:3; Pss 18:31, 46; 28:1; Isa. 17:10). We see something similar at work in 1 Corinthians 10:9 where Paul says that Israel in the wilderness tested 'Christ' and was destroyed by serpents. We look in vain, however, in Numbers 21 – the story which Paul draws on – for any reference to Jesus Christ. Instead, the story relates Israel's impatience with Yahweh (Num. 21:4–9), but the Lord (*kyrios*) of the Old Testament is understood

17. Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*.

to include Jesus Christ. It does not follow, however, that all distinctions between God and Christ are erased, as if Paul were a modalist. God is designated the head of Christ (11:3; cf. 3:23), and even though Jesus reigns and rules now as the exalted Lord, as the heavenly man (15:47–48), he will submit to the Father at the conclusion of history and hand the kingdom over to the Father (15:25–28). The affirmations in 11:3 and 15:28 could also be misunderstood, for Paul is not saying that the Father has an intrinsic authority *ad intra* that the Son lacks. The submission of the Son to the Father has to do with personal relations, with the economic distinction between the members of the Trinity (though we should not say that the economic Trinity is segregated from the immanent Trinity), and it in no way signals an essential inferiority of the Son with the Father.

The lordship of Jesus is also expressed in 1 Corinthians 12:3. The placement of the verse should be observed since we find it at the beginning of Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts, and thus it informs all of chapters 12–14. The lordship of Jesus is fundamental in assessing spiritual gifts in the congregation. Those who are led by the Spirit of God confess that Jesus is Lord. If anyone curses Jesus, it is evident that God's Spirit is not working in that person. Indeed, those who fail to love the Lord will experience an eternal curse (16:22; cf. Rom. 9:3; Gal. 1:8–9). Jesus' lordship is not apparent to all, for it was veiled when he was on earth and therefore 'the rulers of this age . . . crucified the Lord of glory' (2:8). The paradox that the Lord of all could be crucified was hidden from the powers that run the world.

The stature of Jesus is also revealed by the 'name' theology that peeks through in the letter. Christians are described as 'those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1:2). The use of the word 'name' resonates with the name theology of the Old Testament, where God's name is incomparable (Exod. 3:13–15), must not be misused (Exod. 20:7), represents his character (Exod. 33:19; 34:5), is reserved for him alone (Exod. 34:14) and therefore must be honoured (Lev. 18:21). The divine significance of the name is clearly present in 1 Corinthians as well, since calling on Jesus' name means that he is called upon for salvation, and we see in the Old Testament that people called on the name of the Lord

(Gen. 4:26; 1 Kgs 18:24; 2 Kgs 5:11; Ps. 79:6; Jer. 10:25; Zeph. 3:9). Hence, Jesus, since he shares in the divine name (the divine identity!), has the same stature as God. The significance of Jesus is also evident in that the church is his body (12:27) and gathers in his name (5:4), and he is the foundation of the church (3:10). We also find that exhortations are made in his name (1:10), and baptism, sanctification and justification are in his name (6:11). Indeed, when the church gathers, Jesus is present with them (5:4), and such presence signals his supernatural power, as does his giving believers the Spirit of life (15:45). It is significant that the two rituals practised in the church are closely connected to Jesus, testifying to the notion that he is worshipped as Lord. For instance, baptism, the initiation rite into the church, is in Jesus' name (1:13, 15). At the same time, the Lord's Supper celebrates the death of Jesus for the sake of his people (11:23–26). Hence, partaking of the Supper unworthily is sin that may bring sickness or even death (11:27–32).

The greatness of Jesus is evident when Paul refers to the 'day of the Lord'. That day is clearly the last day, when Jesus will appear, for on that day the glory of Jesus will be revealed (1:7–8). The 'day of the Lord' also refers to Jesus' day in 5:5 since the previous verses clearly speak of Jesus being Lord (5:3–4). The significance of the attribution is again clarified by considering the Old Testament, where 'the day of the LORD' refers to Yahweh's day of judgment and salvation (Isa. 13:6; Ezek. 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18, 20; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Zech. 14:1; Mal. 3:5). Remarkably, that day is now also the day of the Lord Jesus Christ, which demonstrates that Jesus occupies a divine role. The connection of the day of the Lord with Jesus fits with the notion that he will come on the last day (4:5), and that he will function as the end-time judge on that day (4:4). The Aramaic phrase *marana tha*, which is translated 'Come, Lord!', is notable (16:22). Paul almost certainly draws upon the wording of the early Palestinian church by which they expressed their longing for Jesus' return. Jesus' role as judge is also a divine prerogative and testifies to his divine splendour.

The unique status of Jesus is also communicated by his authority, which is evident in his lordship. We saw Jesus' lordship in the words *marana tha* ('Come, Lord!', 16:22) and in the confessional statement in 8:6. Often Jesus is designated Lord (cf. 1:2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10; 2:8; 4:4,

5, 17, 19; 5:3, 4, 5; 6:11, 13, 14, 17; 7:10, 12, 22, 25, 32, 34, 35, 39; 9:1, 2, 14; 10:21; 11:11, 23, 27, 32; 12:3, 5; 15:31, 57, 58; 16:7, 10, 19, 23). Paul almost certainly draws on the Old Testament, where Yahweh is designated in the Septuagint as *kyrios* (Lord). We also see the authority of Jesus in that ministers are his servants (4:1) and our bodies belong to the Lord, and therefore sexual sin is forbidden (6:13). Since Jesus is Lord, pleasing him and being devoted to him should mark the lives of Christians (7:32–35). The Lord Jesus exercises his sovereignty over the lives of believers by assigning them to particular ministries (3:5) and also by designating their particular stations in life (7:17). As Lord, he gives directions and commands which believers must obey (7:10, 25; 9:14). Paul recognizes the Lord's sovereignty in acknowledging that he will be able to visit the Corinthians if the Lord permits (16:7).

Jesus is identified as the Christ fifty-five times in 1 Corinthians. Scholars have often argued that the Jewish and messianic sense of the term is erased in the Pauline letters and it has simply become a proper name. It is often remarked that Paul does not emphasize that Jesus is the Davidic Messiah. The significance of the omission, however, is overstated. Paul planted the Corinthian church, and the account of Acts, which should be accepted as historically reliable, indicates that Paul emphasized in his preaching that Jesus was the Christ (Acts 18:5). By the time he wrote 1 Corinthians, there was no need to rehearse what he taught the Corinthians from the outset and was well accepted by them. Since the matter was not controversial, Paul did not elaborate on the truth that Jesus was the Messiah, but the use of the term fifty-five times demonstrates that he did not abandon the idea. Matthew Novenson convincingly argues that the term Christ is an honorific, like Augustus in Caesar Augustus or Epiphanes in Antiochus Epiphanes.¹⁸ Hence, the term Christ means Messiah, and Paul has not turned Christ into a proper name.

God's grace is communicated to his people particularly in Jesus Christ and in the gospel (1:3, 4; 16:23). In setting forth the gospel (15:1–3), Paul begins by focusing on Christ dying for our sins, which

18. Novenson, *Christ among the Messiahs*.

verifies that human beings are separated from God because of their failure to do what he commands. Jesus showed his love for sinners by giving up his life for them, by being crucified on their behalf (1:13). The gospel centres on the cross, for God's saving power is unleashed and his wisdom unveiled when the cross is heralded (1:18–25). Since the message of Jesus as the crucified Lord delivers people from death and sin, Paul resolved to proclaim only the cross of Christ (2:2). What it means to be a Christian is even defined in terms of the cross of Christ, for Paul describes believers as those 'for whom Christ died' (8:11).

The significance of the cross is also communicated with the phrase 'bought at a price' (6:20; 7:23). Before being purchased, believers were enslaved to sin and were not able to extricate themselves from bondage. Through the shedding of his blood, Christ has freed them from the sin that enslaved them. Similarly, Paul celebrates the truth that Christ was sacrificed as 'our Passover lamb' (5:7). As is so often the case with Paul, the Old Testament functions as the resource from which he draws the significance of Christ's death. The Passover sacrifice freed Israel from Egypt, but it was also a substitutionary sacrifice since the blood on the door averted the wrath of God so that the firstborn children were spared from death. Paul likely has the death of Christ in view as well when he says that believers were washed, sanctified and justified in his name (6:11). Washing signifies the cleansing of sins in baptism, but by no means should this be interpreted *ex opere operato*, for Paul makes it clear in 1:13–17 that baptism must be interpreted in the light of the gospel. Baptism does not convey an automatic blessing (cf. 10:2), and it is never separated from personal appropriation and faith. Believers are also sanctified by Christ's death, and this sanctification should not be interpreted as designating what is often called progressive sanctification. Here the reference is to definitive or positional sanctification: believers are holy before God, dedicated and consecrated to God by virtue of Christ's death. Finally, believers are justified, which means that they are declared to be in the right by God the divine judge. Such justification is based on the atoning death of Christ in which he took upon himself the punishment sinners deserved (cf. Rom. 3:21–26; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:10–13).

By virtue of the cross, believers are now in Christ (1:30), that is, they are incorporated into Christ and participate in all the riches of his grace through their union with him. In the Lord's Supper believers participate in the benefits of his shed blood and broken body on their behalf (10:16). God pours out his goodness upon believers through Christ's body and blood which were sacrificed on their behalf. When Paul says that Christ's body, symbolized in the breaking of the bread, is 'for you' (11:24), he is almost certainly thinking of substitution. Christ gave up his body and poured out his blood (cf. Lev. 17:11) so that believers could live. The new covenant was instituted in his blood (11:25), and one of the remarkable features of the new covenant is permanent forgiveness of sins (Jer. 31:34). In the Lord's Supper, then, believers 'proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (11:26). Because of the work of Christ, Christians are 'united with the Lord' and thus 'one with him in spirit' (6:17). Their physical bodies are now members of Christ (6:15).

Paul does not only proclaim the cross, but he also heralds the resurrection (15:4). In fact, he especially concentrates on the resurrection in chapter 15 since it was a matter of dispute. The reality and truth of the resurrection is verified by the many space-time appearances of Jesus Christ after his death (15:5–8). The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is a fundamental belief and certainly not optional, for if Christ is not raised the faith of believers is futile (15:14), they are still in their sins (15:17) and the only prospect is destruction (15:18). The resurrection of Christ guarantees the resurrection of believers; his resurrection is the 'firstfruits' of what is to come (15:20, 23).

c. The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is granted to the church through the resurrected and exalted Christ (15:45). Three different themes relative to the Spirit emerge in 1 Corinthians: (1) the Spirit is a Spirit of revelation; (2) the Spirit gives spiritual gifts; and (3) the church is characterized by the Spirit.

First, we see in 1 Corinthians 2:10–16 that the Spirit is a Spirit of revelation. The Corinthians were entranced with wisdom (1:17 – 2:16), but their attraction to wisdom lauded the artistry, skill and intellect of human beings. Paul dismisses their enchantment with

wisdom as secular, maintaining that it panders to human pride. Where is wisdom to be found, then? Paul teaches, in accord with the Old Testament (cf. Job 28; Prov. 2:6; Dan. 2:20–21), that wisdom is a gift of God. More specifically, he assigns wisdom to the Holy Spirit. Hence, wisdom is not fundamentally discovered by human beings; God ‘revealed’ wisdom to believers ‘by his Spirit’ (2:10). The Spirit is the fount of wisdom since he ‘searches . . . the deep things of God’ (2:10). The unique relationship of the Spirit to God is evident since he knows God’s thoughts in the same way the spirit of a person knows his or her inner thoughts (2:11). Such intrinsic knowledge of God’s very thoughts is possible only for God himself. At the same time, we see here a distinction between the Spirit and God. Still, as we saw above, Paul does not surrender his monotheism. From such statements we have the raw materials from which the doctrine of the Trinity is constructed, since there is only one God and the Spirit is distinct from God, yet he participates in divine activities. Furthermore, the Spirit must be personal since the Spirit knows God’s thoughts, and knowing is a personal activity.

Believers have no platform for boasting in their own wisdom since they know the things of God only because they have received the Spirit (2:12). Receiving the Spirit is the mark and sign in Paul that one has been converted (Gal. 3:2, 5), for those who are not inhabited by the Spirit are unbelievers (Rom. 8:9). The ‘person without the Spirit’ (*psychikos*) does not welcome what the Spirit teaches, but rejects as foolish the truths disseminated by the Spirit (2:14). Paul does not argue that more effort should be expended by unbelievers to obtain wisdom. Instead, they have no capacity or ability to grasp spiritual truths since such can be understood only by those who have the Spirit (2:14). What Paul teaches, therefore, is not human wisdom but wisdom conveyed by the Holy Spirit, hence he explains spiritual truths to those who have the Spirit (2:13). Those who have the Spirit are able to assess reality since they have Christ’s mind through the Spirit (2:15–16).

Paul reminds the Corinthians on two occasions that he speaks to them authoritatively by the Spirit. After his long discussion on marriage and virgins, Paul affirms that he has ‘the Spirit of God’ (7:40). His words on the issues examined in chapter 7 are not merely his private opinion; he was inspired by the Holy Spirit in the words

he wrote. His comment in 14:37, after a long discussion on spiritual gifts, is similar. Those who disagree with Paul may claim to be prophets or 'spiritual' (*pneumatikos*), but Paul reminds them that his words are the Lord's commands (14:37). Indeed, those who refuse to heed Paul's words are ignored by God himself (14:38). Paul, in other words, claims that he is the one who is directed and guided by the Holy Spirit; that he communicates revelation from the Holy Spirit.

Second, spiritual gifts were a major issue in Corinth, and apparently the Corinthians were proud of and divided over the gifts they exercised (12:1 – 14:40). Paul emphasizes that the gifts are 'spiritual' (*pneumatikos*, 12:1; 14:1, 14), which means that they do not derive from human beings but from the Holy Spirit. The gifts are not a manifestation of the self but of the Spirit (12:7). The fundamental truth of the entire discussion is that no-one can confess that Jesus is Lord apart from the Holy Spirit (12:3). Human beings cannot congratulate themselves on their spiritual insight or wisdom as if they recognized Jesus as Lord because of their discernment. The identity of Jesus is discerned only by those who have the Spirit, for the natural person does not receive the things of the Spirit (2:14).

It follows, then, that praise for the gifts given cannot be assigned to human beings. Behind the diversity of gifts lies the Spirit (12:4). Paul assigns a number of gifts to the Spirit, including wisdom, knowledge, faith and healings (12:8–9). He rounds out the list by saying that 'all' the gifts are the work of the Spirit who assigns the gifts as he wishes (12:11). We should stop and note the personality of the Spirit here, for the Spirit cannot be merely a force or something like an impulse or fluid if he *chooses* the gifts people receive.

Third, Christians are marked out by or characterized by the Spirit. Believers are those who are immersed in or drenched by the Spirit, and upon conversion they drink of the Spirit (12:13). To be a Christian means to be a person of the Spirit (cf. 2:10 – 3:1). Hence, believers should glorify God with their bodies because their bodies are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (6:19–20). The indwelling of the Spirit is not only an individual reality, for the Spirit indwells the church corporately as well (3:16). The Lord no longer dwells specially in the Jerusalem temple but in the church of Jesus Christ through his Spirit.

d. The church

i. The cross and divisions

We have just noted that the church is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The problem that particularly plagued the church at Corinth was disunity. Believers quarrelled over Paul, Apollos and Peter (1:11–12; 3:1–4). If we read the argument in 1:17 – 2:16 carefully, it seems that their strife centred on evaluating the rhetorical ability of Paul and Apollos in particular. In this section of the letter Paul calls the church to unity, and he does this in particular by emphasizing the message of the cross. The Corinthians had fallen into a secular way of thinking, but the gospel Paul proclaimed was profoundly different. The message of the cross is foolish to the world, and thus it reverses and subverts what is prized in society. The intellectuals, the politically powerful and the wealthy upper classes typically take umbrage at the message of the cross. God in his wisdom usually calls those deemed to be foolish, those who are marginal socially – the nobodies of the world. By cherishing human wisdom the Corinthians were living contrary to the gospel they had embraced, and thus Paul reminds them that the cross humbles human beings and glorifies God. A genuine understanding of the cross is the pathway to unity.

The divisions in the church crop up again in the matter of lawsuits (6:1–8). It is likely that the wealthier members of the congregation, the social elite, were responsible for the lawsuits. In any case, the church was rent by the legal disputes in its midst. What especially outraged Paul is that they brought the cases before unbelievers. The Corinthians were particularly proud of their wisdom but, ironically enough, there seemed to be no-one wise enough in the church to adjudicate the lawsuits plaguing them! The Corinthians should live as those who have been saved by the cross of Jesus Christ – as those who are washed, sanctified and justified (6:11). Instead of grasping for more and trying to wrest money or damages from fellow-believers, they should be willing to be defrauded and cheated themselves, for willingness to suffer disadvantage for the sake of others is the way of the cross.

Food offered to idols (8:1 – 11:1) is discussed in more detail below, but it should be noted that we find divisions here as well. In this case, the breach is between the weak and those who claim to be in the know, whom I will call ‘the knowers’. The knowers felt free

to eat in the temples of idols and to eat food offered to idols since there is only one true God and idols are non-existent. Hence, the food one eats is inconsequential. Paul reproves the knowers for their lack of love (8:1–3). By exalting their so-called knowledge over love, they demonstrate their ignorance. Again they have forgotten the cross, for their concern should be for the brothers and sisters for whom Christ died (8:11), and thus they should live so that the weak are not scandalized. Paul functions here as an example of Jesus Christ (9:1–22) since he lived for the sake of the others, that is, he lived so that others would experience eschatological salvation. In doing so, he followed the pattern of the cross.

Divisions also surfaced at the Lord's Supper (11:17–34). Here it is quite certain that the tensions erupted because the rich callously disregarded the needs of the poor. The Lord's Supper at Corinth was celebrated during a meal. The social elite in the congregation, however, used the occasion to eat sumptuously and some even got drunk. Meanwhile, the poor at the same meal were not even getting enough to eat. Paul is astonished at such a state of affairs. He instructs them that such behaviour at the Lord's Supper contradicts the purpose of gathering to celebrate Jesus' death for them. At the Supper they allegedly remembered Jesus' broken body and shed blood on their behalf, and then the rich turned around and failed to imitate the self-giving love of Jesus at the Supper. Instead, they used the Supper as a means to satisfy their own desires. The social elite are reminded that they are partaking of the Supper in an unworthy way, in a way that does not match the generous love of God in Christ.

Divisions in the church surfaced as well in the matter of spiritual gifts (12:1 – 14:40). The issue of spiritual gifts is discussed further below, but here we focus on divisiveness. It is apparent from the way Paul addresses the matter that some Corinthians exalted themselves over others by virtue of the gift they exercised – particularly, it seems, the gift of tongues (12:14–26; 14:1–19). Hence, Paul labours to teach them that the gifts are given by the Father, Son and Spirit (12:4–11, 27) and should not be ascribed to one's own spirituality. The purpose of the gifts is not the edification or manifestation of self but the strengthening and building up of others (14:1–19). Even though Paul does not mention the cross,

Jesus' self-giving on the cross is certainly the paradigm for the use of the gifts. The love chapter (13:1–13) functions as a description of the kind of love Jesus shows to his own, and is the pathway to peace in the church.

ii. Church discipline

Paul also discusses church discipline in chapter 5. Apparently a man was having sexual relations with his stepmother (5:1). Perhaps the Corinthians were reluctant to reprove the man because he was wealthy and influential. We also see that the Corinthians misunderstood a previous Pauline letter (5:9–10). They understood Paul to say that Christians should break off relationships with anyone who was living a sinful lifestyle, concluding that this meant they should break off relationships with any unbelievers who were living in such a way. Presumably they reasoned that such a course was completely impractical, and thus they ignored Paul's advice. Paul clarifies, however, that he was not talking about social relationships with people in the world but with those who identified as believers (5:10–11).

It is noteworthy that Paul does not give instructions to the leaders of the church, but instead the entire congregation when gathered together is to act on the matter. Believers have a responsibility to remove anyone living in a blatantly sinful manner (5:12–13). Handing the person over to Satan means that the person is evicted from the church (5:5), since the world is Satan's realm (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2; 1 John 5:19). Paul's primary concern is for the purity of the church and its witness in the world, since tolerating sin will cause evil to spread like gangrene (5:6). Paul draws on the exodus theology of the Old Testament; the church, like Israel of old, is to remove leaven since the Passover sacrifice has occurred, but the leaven represents evil and the Passover sacrifice is Christ's death (5:7–8). Once again, the cross of Christ, and the salvation achieved through the cross, becomes the basis for the life of the Corinthians.

e. The gift of salvation

Since the first letter to the Corinthians was written to address specific concerns in the church, Paul does not rehearse and discuss the nature of salvation in much detail. We have already seen that

reception of the Holy Spirit marks out those who are believers (2:12; 6:19). Indeed, Christians are by definition people of the Spirit (2:10–3:1). Paul also emphasizes the powerful message of the cross, as noted above (1:18–25; 2:2). Christ's death secures forgiveness of sins for those who believe (15:3).

What especially stands out is the power and efficacy of God's grace (1:4). Believers are called to faith by the grace of God. The word 'called' (1:2, 24, 26) does not signify an invitation to believe, for invitations may be refused. Instead, the calling is effectual and invariably persuades human beings to believe. Calling is to be distinguished from preaching (*keēryssō*, 1:23), for Paul preaches to all, both Jews and Gentiles, but the message of the cross is revealed as the wisdom and power of God only to the called (1:24). Paul defines 'calling' (1:26) further in 1:27–28, for there he explains that calling manifests itself in God's choice or election of the foolish, the weak and the nobodies of this world. We have another indication that God's call is effective: the message about Christ crucified is not naturally received (2:14), but is accepted only by those who are recipients of God's effective call. Hence, all praise and honour belong to God for salvation (1:29, 31). We see the same notion when Paul says that believers are 'known' (*egnōstai*) by God (8:3). God's knowledge does not merely convey foresight but represents his covenant love which he grants to some (Gal. 4:9; cf. Rom. 8:29; 11:2; 1 Pet. 1:2). The idea reaches back to the Old Testament where God's covenant love or knowledge is given to Abraham (Gen. 18:19), Israel (Amos 3:2) and Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5).

God's grace also secures final salvation, for since God is faithful he will keep and protect to the end those who are called as saints (1:8–9; 10:13; cf. 1 Thess. 5:24; 2 Thess. 3:3; 2 Tim. 2:13). Those who receive God's saving power are sanctified and holy (1:2; 6:11), not because of their intrinsic holiness but by virtue of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ which grants forgiveness of sins. Paul also says believers are justified and washed (6:11). The latter probably refers to their baptism which symbolizes the cleansing of their sins through the work of Christ. The verb justify (*dikaioō*) should be interpreted forensically (cf. Deut. 25:1; 1 Kgs 8:32; Rom. 2:13; 3:20, 24, 26, 28, 30; 4:2, 5; 8:30, 33; 1 Cor. 4:4; Gal. 2:16; 3:8, 11, 24; 1 Tim. 3:16). Those who belong to Christ have been declared

to be in the right before God on the basis of Christ's death and resurrection.

f. Resurrection

One of the major themes in 1 Corinthians is the resurrection of Christ and its implication for the resurrection of believers. Chapter 15 indicates that the matter arose because some of the Corinthians doubted the physical resurrection of believers, presumably because they were influenced by Graeco-Roman culture which detested the notion of a physical resurrection. Paul begins his argument in chapter 15 by emphasizing the veracity of Christ's resurrection from the dead. He advances this argument by stressing that the appearances of Christ to specific people after his death verify that he was physically raised (15:4–8). The notion that these were merely hallucinations is refuted by the appearance to over 500 people at once (15:6), for it is highly unlikely that 500 individuals experienced a hallucination at the same moment. Indeed, Paul emphasizes that many of those who saw the resurrected Christ were still alive, which implies that their witness to the resurrection was not just a matter of historical record but could also be attested by their living testimony.

In 15:12–19 Paul investigates the relationship between the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of believers. Four times in these verses he forges an indissoluble relationship between the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of believers, maintaining that if one denies the physical resurrection of believers, it follows that one does not truly believe in the resurrection of Christ (cf. 6:14). Since all believers are in Christ rather than in Adam (15:20–22), what is true of Christ is also true of believers. Just as all die in Adam, so too all will be granted resurrection life in Christ. The consequences that follow if Christ was not raised from the dead are also iterated: the apostolic preaching is futile and false (15:14–15), the faith of the Corinthians is useless (15:15, 17), their sins are not forgiven (15:17), they are headed for eschatological destruction (15:18) and they are to pitied for believing a lie (15:19).

Verses 23–28 add a crucial thought: there is an interval between the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of believers. Christ is the 'firstfruits' (15:20, 23). Believers will be raised on the last day,

when death is defeated and demonic powers are stripped of their rule, and when Christ hands the kingdom over to God. The fact, then, that believers have mortal bodies now does not constitute evidence against physical resurrection.

Paul gives other reasons to believe in a resurrection in verses 29–34. The practice of baptizing for the dead (see commentary) makes no sense if there is not a future resurrection. So, too, it would be nonsensical for Paul to face suffering in his ministry if there were not a future resurrection. Paul suggests that the Corinthians were straying because they were influenced by flawed and fallen people.

Finally, in verses 35–58 Paul addresses objections about the possibility of a future resurrection. Apparently some thought it was inconceivable and impossible. A raft of illustrations is given to show the plausibility of belief in the resurrection. The life that comes from a ‘dead’ seed, that is, the plant that sprouts up after the seed is planted, shows that God can produce a physical form that is quite different from existing life (15:36–38). The diversity of bodies on earth and in the heavenly spheres attests that God has the creative power to raise believers from the dead (15:39–41). Since ‘bodily’ life is even now marked by rich diversity, we should be able to discern that God is able to create new life in the future. The discontinuity between the present and the future body is stated (15:42–44): the present body is perishable, dishonourable, weak and natural; the future body is imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual. The word ‘spiritual’ does not mean the body is non-physical; the point is that the body is animated and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Those who doubt the resurrection need to take into account both the continuity and the discontinuity between the present and the future body. First comes Adam and then comes Christ (15:45–49). From Adam believers receive a natural and mortal body, while from Christ they receive a heavenly body, that is, one that can live in heavenly realms. Hence, the flesh-and-blood bodies believers have now cannot enter God’s kingdom (15:50). When Christ comes, however, their bodies will be instantly changed: the dead will be raised and the living will be transformed (15:51–52). The perishable and mortal will give way to the imperishable and immortal (15:53–54), and

death and sin will be vanquished for ever through Jesus Christ (15:55–57).

g. Living a new life

First Corinthians could be designated a parenetic letter, and thus the new life believers are called upon to live plays a central role in the epistle. We have already noted that believers are called upon to live in unity with one another, so that theme will not be rehearsed again here. A few themes in the letter will be featured, from which it should be evident that the new life of believers, the moral character of Christians, was of vital concern to Paul.

The sexual ethic of the church comes to the forefront in 1 Corinthians. The church, as we see in chapter 5, was tolerating a man claiming to be a Christian who lived incestuously with his stepmother. Paul was scandalized that the church would sink lower than secular society in accepting such a state of affairs. Indeed, his fundamental concern was that the church's leniency would have a viral effect on the entire community (5:6). Paul calls upon the church to act decisively. The church should not be characterized by 'malice and wickedness' but 'sincerity and truth' (5:8) so that the moral beauty of the lives of Christians might attract outsiders and bring glory to God.

The command to glorify God with one's body as it pertains to sexual morality is also emphasized in 6:12–20. It seems that some of the Corinthians adopted a standard Greek view which said that what we do with our bodies is inconsequential. Such a stance fits with Corinthian doubts about a future resurrection (15:1–57). If our bodies are destined to perish and only our souls matter, we are free to indulge our desires sexually in the same way that we satisfy our desires for food and drink (6:13). Paul emphasizes the significance of the body and the union of believers with the Lord (6:13–17). The bodies of believers will be raised from the dead, just as the Lord Jesus was raised, and thus our bodies have permanent significance. Furthermore, since believers are united with Christ and belong to him, it is singularly inappropriate to engage in sexual relationships with prostitutes. Sexual sin is committed with the body, and thus there is a sense in which it is particularly defiling and damaging (6:18). Believers, after all, are not the captains of their fates and the masters of their souls. They have been purchased with the blood of

Christ, and he is their master and Lord (6:19–20). They are also indwelt by the Holy Spirit (6:19). Hence, they are to honour and glorify God with their bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit bought with Christ's blood.

The kind of life Christians should live also peeps out in the discussion on virgins (7:32–35). If one is married, then, by all means, one should consider how to please one's wife or husband. The advantage of being single, however, is that one can devote one's energy full-time to pleasing the Lord without being tied down to hearth and home. Certainly, Paul does not despise the latter, but he commends the single life for the freedom it affords for a life consecrated to God. A remarkable paragraph in that regard is 7:17–24, which sits in the middle of the discussion on marriage and virgins, and its central place accords with its importance. Four times in this paragraph believers are called upon to remain in the calling in which they were called. Paul does not mean by this that one should never get married if single, nor does it mean that one should refrain from becoming free if one is a slave (7:21). Instead, Paul wants to disabuse the Corinthians from thinking that their station in life must be altered if they are to be effective as believers. Their lives are no longer their own, for they have been 'bought at a price' (7:23). They must not think they will be more effective if their place in society changes. Instead, they must serve the Lord in whatever circumstances they find themselves in.

What it means to live as redeemed persons becomes evident in the text about lawsuits (6:1–8). In one sense, the issues were quite trivial, for they probably had to do with civic lawsuits dealing with matters of everyday life. What annoyed Paul was not the presence of conflict but the appeal to unbelievers to resolve the disputes in the community. Believers should pursue the way of love and allow themselves to be defrauded and cheated, but they were actually moving in the other direction by defrauding and cheating others. Such behaviour did not accord with the new life granted to believers. After all, they were washed in baptism, sanctified at conversion and declared to be in the right before God (6:11). Dissension and cheating contradict what it means to be the holy people of the Lord. We see the same kind of disunity and selfishness at the Lord's table (11:17–34). Apparently, the rich were gorging themselves and

drinking sumptuously and ignoring the needs of the poor. The breach in the community, the callous disregard for the needs of others, while celebrating the Lord's Supper – which signifies self-giving love for others – was quite the monstrosity. Again, Paul calls upon believers to live in a new way in the light of the cross.

Believers are exhorted to 'flee from sexual immorality' (6:18), as noted above, and also to 'flee from idolatry' (10:14; cf. 10:7). The subject of idolatry will be considered further in the discussion below on food offered to idols. We see the influence from the Old Testament, since the Lord must be first in one's affections and there is no toleration of worship of other gods (Exod. 20:3–6). Those who are redeemed by Christ must not allow any space for idolatry in their lives.

The new way of life for believers is a life of love, a love that is modelled supremely on the self-giving love of Christ on the cross. The famous love chapter (1 Cor. 13) is placed in the midst of the discussion on spiritual gifts. Spirituality is not measured by ecstatic experiences or by remarkable giftedness; it reveals itself in a life of sacrificial love whereby one gives oneself to others. The call to edify others in using spiritual gifts is just another way of saying that we should love one another. Similarly, at the outset of the discussion on food offered to idols Paul exalts the supremacy of love (8:1–3). The knowers were proud of their insight into idols and the significance of idol food, but they revealed their callous self-regard in not caring about the lives of those who were weak and were scandalized by the knowers eating food offered to idols. Chapter 9 functions as an intermediary chapter in the discussion of food offered to idols, just as chapter 13 does in the discussion of spiritual gifts. And chapter 9 has a similar purpose to chapter 13, for Paul presents himself as an example of one who disregards his own right for pay for the sake of others and particularly for their salvation. In other words, Paul conducted his ministry by the rule of love, seeking what was good for others instead of pursuing his own benefit.

Indeed, every ethical lapse in the letter can be attributed to lovelessness. Lack of unity reflects self-absorption and even narcissism, for harmony is the fruit of love. Promoting one faction above another, which Paul identifies as pride (1:29, 31; 4:6–7, 18–19), violates the principle of love which should animate our lives.

Similarly, the treatment of the poor by the rich at the Lord's Supper reveals their moral blindness and utter self-regard. Allowing incest in the church might seem to be loving if one defines love as tolerance of all behaviours. Such a definition, however, opposes the scriptural ethic, for love must manifest itself in holiness, which even unbelievers recognized in the case of incest (5:1). Certainly, defrauding and cheating others in lawsuits is unloving (6:1–8). So, too, using other people for sexual pleasure in casual and non-committed relationships is contrary to love (6:12–20), since love seeks the good of others, and one's body is used to bring glory to God (6:20).

h. Food offered to idols

The issue of food offered to idols is one of the most difficult and contested matters in the interpretation of 1 Corinthians. We cannot summarize all the views presented here, but a couple of the most popular views will be noted. Many argue that Paul allows believers to eat food offered to idols even in a temple setting, provided that the weak are not scandalized and the setting is social rather than religious. Wendell Willis, for instance, contends that some invitations to the temple were for social rather than religious purposes, and thus it would be permissible, as long as the weak were not offended, to participate on such occasions.¹⁹ Others, like Gordon Fee, argue that one must never eat food in the idol's temple because the attempt to distinguish between social and religious occasions in the temple fails.²⁰ In other words, every meal in a temple was religious in nature, even if the occasion was a birthday party. Hence, according to Fee, believers commit idolatry if they partake of the food in the temple of an idol. On the other hand, many interpreters think believers have a right (8:9) to partake knowingly of food offered to idols if the food is purchased from the city market. Believers must refrain, however, if weak Christians or unbelievers reveal that the food was offered to idols. One may knowingly eat food offered to idols sold in the marketplace, according to this reading, as long as the weak do not know about it.

19. Willis, *Idol Meat in Corinth*.

20. Fee, 'Eidolothytia Once Again', pp. 172–197.

I will defend the view here that Paul's stance on food offered to idols is that believers should never knowingly eat food offered to idols. This reading has been defended by a number of scholars in recent years.²¹ This reading is the most persuasive for the following reasons. First, eating food offered to idols is regularly proscribed in the New Testament (Acts 15:29; 21:25; Rev. 2:14, 20). Second, reception history is important as well; the early church was unanimous that Christians should not eat food offered to idols. We have no example of Christians being permitted to eat food offered to idols.

Third, what believers do not have to do, however, is to try to discern whether food was offered to idols (1 Cor. 10:27–30). They are free to eat all food without inquiring about whether it was offered to idols, but if they are told it was offered to idols, then they should refrain from eating it.

Fourth, what Paul says about food offered to idols should not be conflated with his advice about foods in Romans 14:1 – 15:6. The two passages have a number of similarities but there are also important distinctions. Romans permits eating foods that were *unclean* by virtue of Old Testament food laws (Rom. 14:1–3, 6, 14–15, 20–21, 23), but 1 Corinthians 8 – 10 refers to *food offered to idols*. Paul never uses the term 'food sacrificed to idols' (*eidōlothytōn*) in Romans. The situations are different and must not be conflated. Believers are no longer under the Mosaic covenant and its proscriptions, hence the freedom to eat unclean foods as Paul teaches in Romans. On the other hand, they must not commit idolatry, and Paul believes that eating food sacrificed to idols is idolatry (10:14, 18–22).

The central argument against what is being suggested here is 8:9, where Paul speaks of the 'right' (*exousia*) of the Corinthians to eat in the temple of idols. Added to this is his insistence that idols are non-existent and that there is nothing objectively wrong with idol food (8:4–6). This reading is certainly possible, but it is probably wrong. Paul can speak as he does about their 'right' to eat in 8:9

21. See e.g. Cheung, *Idol Food in Corinth*. See also Garland and Schnabel in their commentaries on 1 Cor. 8:1 – 11:1.

because they were familiar with his teaching that eating food offered to idols in pagan temples was forbidden. In other words, the Corinthians drew conclusions contrary to Paul and extended their ‘freedom’ in illegitimate ways. Hence, the ‘right’ here is one claimed by the Corinthians, not one approved by Paul.

Paul makes it clear in the course of his argument why he disagrees. In chapter 8 he does not immediately unload on those who argue for such freedom. He sets the theological table regarding the centrality of love (8:1–3), the oneness of God and the lordship of Christ and its implications for idols and idol food, and the need to be concerned about the weak (8:7–13). He first zeros in on the adverse effect their behaviour has on the weak in chapter 8.

Paul introduces himself as an example in chapter 9, but at the conclusion of chapter 9 (9:24–27) he begins to introduce the danger facing those partaking of idol food, and that danger is apostasy. The many examples from the history of Israel (10:1–11) buttress the point, namely, those who think they can ‘stand firm’ while committing idolatry are on the verge of falling (10:12). Idolatry must be forsaken with all urgency (10:14), since those who give way to it will not receive the heavenly inheritance. Paul clarifies this in 10:19–22. Even though idols and idol food are nothing, there are demons behind the idols. Hence, those who partake of food sacrificed to idols are participating with demonic powers and are guilty of idolatry. Paul has no objections to eating food for sale in the marketplace if its nature is unknown (10:23 – 11:1), but if it is disclosed to be idol food, one should refrain from eating it.

i. Spiritual gifts and the church

Spiritual gifts play a significant role in 1 Corinthians. As noted earlier, the discussion on spiritual gifts is founded on the lordship of Jesus (12:3). Spiritual gifts are to be exercised under Christ’s lordship. Gifts are not the expression of one’s personality, nor are they intended to reveal the giftedness of the human being; they reveal that those exercising them are servants of the Christ.

A variety of gifts is listed in 1 Corinthians (12:8–11, 28–30). Since gifts are also listed in other texts, it is apparent that the catalogue of gifts in 1 Corinthians does not represent an exhaustive list. Despite the length of the discussion in chapters 12–14, we do not

have a treatise or full explication of the gifts here. Table 7 below lists the various spiritual gifts noted by Paul. I will not comment here on the nature and definition of the various gifts, for that will be handled in the commentary under the respective verses.

Table 7: Spiritual gifts in Paul

| Romans 12:6–8 | 1 Corinthians 12:7–10 | 1 Corinthians 12:28 | Ephesians 4:11 |
|--------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Prophecy | Prophecy | Apostles Prophets | Apostles Prophets Evangelists |
| | Ability to distinguish between spirits Word of wisdom | | |
| Teaching Exhorting | Word of knowledge | Teachers | Pastors and teachers |
| | Working of miracles Gifts of healing | Miracles Gifts of healing | |
| Service Leading | | Helping Administrating | |
| | Various kinds of tongues Interpretation of languages | Various kinds of tongues | |
| Giving | Faith | | |
| Mercy | | | |

Through a mirror reading of the letter and an understanding of human nature, it is evident that some Corinthians saw themselves as a level or two above others based on the gifts they exercised, especially if one had the gift of tongues. Paul goes to some effort to emphasize that there is no basis for pride in gifts. Behind the variety of gifts is the same Spirit (12:4), behind the various kinds of service is the same Lord (12:5) and behind the different results and effects of the gifts is the same God (12:6). Instead of seeing the

giftedness of the one exercising the gift or of the one performing the service or effecting a result, one should see the Spirit, the Son and the Father. What must be attended to is the sovereignty of God. The function one has in the body has been assigned by God himself, representing his will (12:18). Hence, whether one is an apostle, prophet, teacher, and so on, should be ascribed to God's will (12:28). The honour which comes with a particular gift also comes from God's wisdom and rule (12:22–24). No reason exists, then, for someone to feel superior or inferior (12:15–16).

The variety in the body, as noted above, reflects God's wisdom. The body is marked by unity and diversity (12:20). We should pause to note that Paul compares the church to a body (12:12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 24, 27), and the body beautifully illustrates the unity and diversity of the church since there are many members but one body (12:20). Paul humorously considers the absurdity of the whole body being an eye or the whole body being an ear (12:17). The unity and diversity of the body, then, reflects God's purpose in creating the church, and any feelings of pride or embarrassment about one's gifts are excluded.

The purpose of the gifts is the edification, the building up and strengthening, of the church. Hence, believers should desire greater gifts to edify the church. Given what Paul says in chapters 12–14, greater gifts do not indicate that one is superior spiritually, for such a claim would promote pride, which is contrary to one of the fundamental purposes in chapters 12–14. Prophecy is superior to tongues, not because those who prophesy are more spiritual, but because untranslated languages do not edify others since those who hear cannot understand what is being said (14:2–5).

Paul labours to make it clear to the Corinthians that edification is the aim of believers gathering together, and that such edification occurs where there is *understanding*. Edification takes place through the *mind*. Paul gives a number of illustrations to convey the point. For instance, it will do little good if someone plays a harp or flute so badly that no-one knows what tune is being played (14:7). And if a bugle, intended to sound the alarm for war, is blown badly, no-one will prepare for war (14:8). So, too, tongue-speaking without understanding is like talking to the air, just as one does not get any benefit conversing with someone from a different culture if the

language spoken is unintelligible (14:10–11). People are only edified if their *minds* are engaged, so that they can say an intelligent ‘Amen’ to what is being said (14:13–19). Edification does not bypass the mind for Paul but is channelled through our understanding.

A question arises: Why should believers pursue particular gifts if gifts are assigned sovereignly by God? A couple of things can be said in reply. Perhaps Paul has the corporate community as a whole in mind so that he intends to say that the church as a whole, not individuals, should pursue the greater gifts. It is probably the case, however, that Paul also has in mind individuals in the church. They should individually pursue the greater gifts. The tension found here between divine sovereignty and the decisions of human beings is typical of what we find in the Scriptures. For instance, Proverbs 2:1–5 stresses emphatically that human beings should seek wisdom, but Proverbs 2:6 affirms that the Lord gives wisdom. The two truths do not contradict one another; they both represent reality. God is sovereign over everything, even over where dice land (Prov. 16:33), yet human decisions are authentic and genuine.

The discussion in 14:20–25 is quite difficult and one should consult the commentary for details, but Paul’s point again is that tongues without an interpretation do not encourage and strengthen others. Unbelievers or interested bystanders will think that tongue-speakers are out of their minds; they will not be built up but driven away if they do not understand what is happening. Paul reminds his readers of Isaiah 28, where the foreign language of the Assyrians signified that the day of judgment had arrived. Paul uses the Isaiah 28 text analogously. His point is that untranslated languages will bring judgment in driving away unbelievers from the church, and believers *should desire the salvation of unbelievers, not their judgment*. Hence, prophecy is far better because unbelievers will hear and understand and may repent and turn to the Lord when hearing the prophetic word.

If one value in using gifts is *edification*, another value is *order* and peace. The gathering together with other believers should be structured and not chaotic. Actually, Paul does not value order for its own sake; order is to be pursued for the sake of edification. The word ‘order’ does not include all dimensions of what is desired when the church gathers. We see from 14:26–33 that order is to be pursued

because it enables wider participation so that one or two people do not dominate the meeting time. Paul recognizes that the church is enriched by hearing from a number of people in its meetings. Remarkably, one person who is prophesying should give way to another, instead of droning on and on (14:31–32)! Paul knows about the tendency of some to control church meetings. The need for order is evident in tongue-speaking and prophecy. Only two or three should speak in tongues when gathered, and only one person should speak at a time (14:27). At the same time, it is vital that someone is present who is able to interpret the tongue. Some might think everyone speaking in tongues at once indicates a wonderful spiritual experience, but Paul rejects such as confusing and unhelpful. We see again that an untranslated language is prohibited because it does not edify the congregation. Paul's concern for order is also demonstrated in the limitations assigned. The entire time together must not consist in tongue-speaking or prophesying (14:27, 29). Two or three can speak in tongues and prophecy, but the activity must not go on for ever. God is a God of order and clarity.