



1 Corinthians

Chapters 1-6

Concerning Spiritual People

Perhaps the most beloved and well known passage in all of scripture is found in this letter, 1 Corinthians 13. It is Paul's ode to Love.

"If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love I am but a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal." –1 Cor. 13:1

While 1 Corinthians 13 is arguably the best definition on love which has ever been written, the occasion for its authorship was not primarily to address young couples who are about to be married! Rather, it serves as the quite convicting conclusion of a long confrontational letter to a group of Christians who had a very deep misunderstanding of what it truly means to be "Spiritual People".

The members of church in Corinth were converts from the pagan gentile culture of the city of Corinth. In some ways, they were falling back into some of the cultural practices and notions of their pagan community by visiting pagan temples and engaging in the sexual immorality of temple prostitution. The theological justification for their behavior was grounded in a super-spiritualized view of themselves as having already attained "angelic" status which was evidenced (in their minds) by "eloquent wisdom" and "speaking in the tongues of angels". From the apostle's perspective this was just misguided and immature arrogance (4:18-19, 5:2) and prideful boasting (1:29, 3:21, 5:6, 13:4). This put the Corinthian church at loggerheads with Paul and his Gospel teachings. The crux of the issue centered around two main topics Spirit and Body. A dualism had surfaced within this church which led to abuses and misunderstanding related to how to live as spirit-filled people in an earthly body.

The church in Corinth was a relatively young congregation planted by the apostle Paul sometime around AD 49-51 (see Acts 18). The situation which had occasioned the letter called 1 Corinthians had been brewing over a three year period since his departure from them. Paul had already written to the church (5:9) concerning concerns he had pertaining to their syncretism with the pagan temple worship and the sexual immorality of the culture. He had also received at least one report of the situation in the Corinthian church by way of at least one report from "Chloe's people" (1:11). It is also clear from 1 Corinthians that he had received a letter from them brought by members from the church (16:15-17).

The letter and reports that Paul receives indicate a growing divergence between the church in Corinth and Paul. Paul's return letter (1 Corinthians) is written to address these concerns he hears about them



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and the concerns they have about him. The letter divides into these two main concerns. He first addresses the concerning reports he has heard about them in chapters 1-6. Then in chapters 7-15, he addresses the several questions and concerns that they have about Paul and his teachings to them.

The Literary Structure of 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians	Chapters 1-16
Letter Opening	1:1-9
Responding to Reports: Violations against the Temple of the Lord (1-6)	Violations against the Unity of the Temple of God—Divisions caused by False Wisdom 1:10-4:20
	Violations against the Sanctity of the Temple—Sexual Immorality and Lawsuits 5:1-6:20
Responding to Concerns About Paul and his Teachings—Bodies and the Body of Christ (7-15)	The Sexual Body: Marriage and Sex 7:1-40
	Food for the Body 8:1-11:1
	Expressions of the Body in Worship 11:2-16
	The Sacrament Body of Christ: The Lord's Supper 11:17-34
	The Church as Body: Spiritual Gifts 12:1-14:40
	Resurrection of the Body 15:1-58
Letter Conclusion	16:1-24

Responding to Reports: Violations against the Temple of the Lord (1-6)

Paul uses two primary metaphors to address the false teaching and practice which had infiltrated the Corinthian church: Temple and Body. The Corinthians had developed a misunderstanding of the relationship between body and spirit. This misunderstanding was bearing fruit in a marked arrogance causing divisions among themselves and with them and Paul, it also was manifesting in the form of fleshly immorality with their bodies that violated the Spirit of God. In this first main section Paul uses the theme of the Temple of the Lord in order to address concerning reports (1:11) that he had received about the beliefs and practices of the church.

Violations against the Unity of the Temple of God—Divisions caused by False Wisdom (1:10-4:20)

In this section, Paul is primarily concerned with the integrity of the church and its message. His main concern is that their divisions are “destroying God’s temple” (3:17). At the root of the divisions and quarrellings which have manifest is a marked arrogance that they have now become “Spiritual beings”



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akin to the angels because of a “Wisdom” they have received apart from Paul. The main division is with Paul and his Gospel message. Paul writes to them:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 1 Cor. 2:1-2

Paul’s challenge to the Corinthians is that true Spiritual Persons are humbled by the message of the Cross. That is not eloquent wisdom from a worldly perspective—on the contrary, it is foolishness. Their arrogance about their state of being as “Spiritual” had actually revealed that they were still quite worldly.

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, 3 for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? 1 Cor. 3:1-3

Paul seeks to help them to understand that true Spiritual people see themselves as submissive to the Holy Spirit of God. Their quarrels with one another and Paul only served to destroy the temple of the Holy Spirit:

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. 1 Cor. 3:16-17

God’s Spirit manifests not in puffed up arrogance, but in weakness. In the weakness of our humanity, his power is displayed in glory. They saw Paul’s weakness as a mark of worldliness; Paul asserts the opposite (4:1-20).

Violations against the Sanctity of the Temple—Sexual Immorality and Lawsuits (5:1-6:20)

The arrogance of the Corinthians in their overestimation of their Spirituality had manifest in a peculiar misappropriation of the use of their bodies. The three instances that had been reported to Paul (perhaps by Chloe’s people) were: blatant inappropriate sexual relationships, lawsuits among believers in pagan courts and visiting temples for temple prostitution.



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As God's holy and redeemed people, the Corinthians should manifest God in their earthly existence and life. Unfortunately, their arrogance had blinded them to their own ungodliness:

6 Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. 8 Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Like the Old Testament believers, sin must be purified by sacrifice and a fresh start made in "sincerity and truth". The sacrifice has been made by Christ as a Passover Lamb, what remained for the Corinthians to manifest his holiness in a sanctified or holy life.

Instead, their behavior was scandalizing the sacrifice of Jesus proclaimed in the Gospel. Their lawsuits in the secular courts against fellow believers showed the message of reconciliation as practically meaningless.

The continuation of temple visits and partaking of temple prostitution was a violation of the temple of the Holy Spirit:

Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two will become one flesh." 17 But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. 18 Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. 19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, 20 for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Again, Paul builds on the theme of our bodies as the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Bodies are valuable to God. The Spirit and the Body are interconnected. What we do with our bodies is related to our Spiritual personhood and vice versa; our spiritual relationship with God necessitates a holiness of life with respect to the body. From here, Paul will use the occasion of the letter written by Corinthians to him as the opportunity to teach on the theology of our human bodies and the Body of Christ.