



1 Corinthians 11:23-26

1 CORINTHIANS

☀ Background File

Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthian church around 53-55 C.E., from Ephesus (see 16:8). In it he responds to a letter that some in the church have written to him (7:1). But he is also responding to an *oral* report from “Chloe’s people” (1:11; see 5:1), who have brought him disturbing news. The church is divided, and one of the points at issue seems to be Paul’s own authority.

☀ What’s the Story?

Although we call this “First Corinthians,” Paul wrote another, earlier letter (see 5:9), which is lost. First Corinthians is one more stage in a much longer back-and-forth between Paul and the Corinthian church. After Paul “planted” the community of believers in Christ in Corinth (3:6) and stayed there for a year and a half (Acts 18:1-11), he left to continue his work elsewhere. Another teacher, Apollos, came to Corinth and was successful, apparently baptizing many (“Apollos watered,” 3:6). Paul writes that they are “working together” (3:9), so he scolds the Corinthians for being divided, siding with one apostle or another (1:10-17).

This complex letter gives us our best first-hand information about day-to-day realities in the early church. It is a bewildering mix of issues, involving competing claims to wisdom, wealth, power, and spiritual gifts. Apparently people disagree about specific practices: should Christians break off relationships, including marriages, with nonbelievers? Can they eat meat that has been offered to other gods? Paul brings up still other issues: sexual immorality (chapter 5), Christians taking each other to court (chapter 6), what Paul considers their abuse of the Lord’s Supper (chapter 11) and of the charismatic gift of speaking in tongues (chapter 14).

Some influential scholars say that *control* is the central issue in the letter. They think Paul wrote to establish *his* authority over the church. The Corinthians had misunderstood the gospel, supposing that Paul’s message of freedom in the gospel meant they could throw aside moral constraints and social roles of the time. For example, some Corinthian women had thrown off the veil, perhaps a symbol of subordination to their husbands (11:2-16). They were speaking up in church (14:34-35), and some may have declared their independence from nonbelieving husbands and fiancés (chapter 7). In short, they were acting as men would act and taking on roles normally reserved for men. Paul stepped in and reasserted what that society said was the rightful control exercised by men, God, and apostles—chiefly himself.

Paul certainly confronts bad behavior in the letter. Recent studies have suggested that Paul was angered by elite persons in the church, males mostly, who misused church meetings as opportunities to display social status. Persons in antiquity were intensely aware of rank. Gender, class, wealth, education, freeborn or slave, urban or rural dwelling—these were some of the factors that determined a person’s standing. It was a social fact of life that gatherings were occasions when the honorable were honored and the humble reminded of their shameful position. Paul attacks those in the Corinthian church who turned the Christian assembly into such an event. He accuses them of celebrating their prosperity while he and the other apostles still appear “like the rubbish of the world” (4:13). He scolds them for ignoring the hungry at the Lord’s Supper (11:20-22). Paul’s answer to their identity crisis seems clear enough. The church’s humble beginnings were no accident. “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise,” the weak to shame the strong, the “low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are” (1:27-28).

What’s the Message?

First Corinthians is primarily about love. That is why reading the letter as Paul’s attempt to establish authority over the church misses the point. Love is not the same thing as control, nor is love the same as discipline. Control is power over others or even power on behalf of others. But love is communion. It is the sharing of all things between persons who are completely open to one another. It is mutuality and equality. Most of all, it is a desire for the presence of the other. It is sitting face to face and knowing as one is known. Love themes run throughout 1 Corinthians, indicating that Paul is up to something other than asserting his authority.

The structure of 1 Corinthians reflects Paul’s strategy of replacing displays of social status with love. Paul ridicules power as it is normally interpreted and claims real power is Christ crucified (1:1–2:16). He redefines leadership as the distribution of the mystery of God’s will to glorify humanity (3:1–4:21). He attacks the privileges of the elite and praises love as the better way for the church to live (5:1–14:40). In chapter 13, he speaks of love as the greatest of God’s gifts. Finally, chapter 15 tells the good news of how God’s love will be everything to everyone in the resurrection.

Salutation

1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord^a and ours:

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.



1:1-2 **apostle of Christ... Sosthenes... Corinth:**

Paul claims to be an “apostle,” which means “one who is chosen and sent.” It is not clear if Sosthenes is the same person who was leader of the Jewish synagogue in Corinth (see Acts 18:17). The city of Corinth, in Greece, was a center of culture and had many temples honoring Greek gods such as Aesclepius, the god of healing, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love.

^a Gk *theirs*