

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to a community in the middle of a culture war

The church at Corinth had many problems. Some simple kindness would have helped.

Sunday's Coming Premium

January 3, 2018



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Saint Paul*, oil on canvas, c. 1657

Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, now lost, in the fall of 50 CE. The Corinthians pushed back quite hard. They wrote a reply to Paul with a number of questions. In the spring of 51 CE he wrote a long letter back, our 1 Corinthians. This is where we start to build up a more detailed picture of the community, and it is not a pretty sight.

The church at Corinth was a mess. I count 15 distinguishable problems that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians: partisanship, with the Corinthians factionalizing behind rival leaders (1:10-4:21; 16:10-18); incest (5:1-13); prostitution (6:12-21); celibacy within marriage (7:1-7); Christians married to one another asking about divorce (7:8-11, 39); Christians married to pagans asking about divorce (7:12-16); questions surrounding marriage and remarriage (7:25-40); lawsuits (6:1-11); idolatry (8:1-11:1); concerns about women praying and prophesying in immodest ways (11:2-16); chaos in worship, with speaking in tongues and competing voices (chapter 14); inequality in the communal meal (11:17-34); denials of the bodily resurrection of Jesus and of Christians (15:1-58); the collection of a large sum of money to be sent to Jerusalem (16:1-4); and a change in Paul's travel plans (16:5-9).

Underlying this mess, there were four main difficulties: a basic failure in relating to one another in love; a dramatic failure of the local church leaders to act considerately in the face of their competition for status and influence; arrogant theological reasoning that denied the importance of the body (which we might call "Christian intellectualism"); and tensions arising from the pressures that Paul's teaching about sex placed on his converts. Each of these problems would have been bad enough, but when they were all present together, the combination was toxic.

When we take a step back from all the ins and outs of the issues in the letter, we can see that Paul is urging something simple on the Corinthians. A great deal of what he says can be summed up in the phrase "appropriate relating." One of the letter's high points is chapters 12-13. Chapter 13 describes at length the principal Christian way of relating, which is with love. Its profundity is evidenced by the fact that it is still read at weddings all over the world today.

Love is patient, love is kind.

It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered.

It keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. (13:4–8a, NIV)

Chapter 12 uses the image of the body of Christ to lay out the way the community should relate together. No part of the Christian body is unimportant. Every part is linked to every other part, no matter how humble it might seem to be.

Paul applies this advice especially to the disorders in the Corinthians' communal meeting. This was a meal together at which the Lord's Supper was celebrated, followed by a period of worship with singing and the use of spiritual gifts. People spoke in tongues, prophesied, and prayed for one another's healing (11:2–14:40). We have already noted how many problems are evident here. It is nevertheless amazing to observe how many of these problems would disappear if the Corinthians would just be nicer to one another.

People who love one another don't pray and prophesy in the communal meeting so that their clothing will become disarrayed and violate a viewer's sense of propriety; they don't shame their spouses publicly with their behavior; they don't bring lavish meals to a church picnic and gorge on them while other church members stand around hungry; and they don't babble in tongues on top of one another during the time of worship. Neither do they factionalize into bitter partisan disputes. They don't slander rival leaders but stay loyal to their original founder; they don't steal from one another; they don't mock people who are offended by a food item that they personally don't think matters; neither do they judge people whom they think are ignoring something that should worry them.

So many problems in Corinth—and I suspect in many other places—would be solved if Christians were simply kinder to one another. But something seems to be making considerate and appropriate relating especially hard at Corinth, and we don't have to look far to find out what that was. The Corinthian church was unusually diverse, and the ethic of appropriate relating that Paul taught wasn't strong enough to overcome the tensions that these differences were bringing into the community. In this respect, Paul's greatest missionary success created his greatest challenges.

When the church was founded ten years before this exchange of correspondence, in the early 40s, Priscilla and Aquila worked with Paul to convert people in the

handworker community and probably also in the streets outside the small factory-shops the handworkers labored in. These potential converts were out-and-out pagans. They were tough, poor, uncouth people. In the synagogue in Corinth, however, Paul was more successful than usual. Generally, he got expelled from the local synagogue after he had tried to convince everyone there to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, and sometimes he was quickly chased out of town. But in Corinth he had some outstanding successes. He converted a wealthy God worshiper, Gaius Titius Justus, and a Jewish synagogue patron, Crispus. By the time he wrote his Corinthian letters, ten years later, another Jewish synagogue patron had been converted, Sosthenes. So there were Jewish converts and God worshipers in the Corinthian church alongside the pagans. Equally important, some of these converts seem to have been wealthy, forming an additional contrast with the poor pagan handworkers and street converts.

Ancient society was marked by considerable differences in wealth. The top 1.5 percent in some cities monopolized at least 20 percent of all the resources. The rest of the top 10 percent owned the next 20 percent of income. The bottom echelon of society lived in constant hunger, literally "from hand to mouth," meaning that when they got any food they immediately ate it. By our standards, then, ancient society was extremely unequal. The elite were very wealthy and well connected compared to everyone else, and vastly superior to them in terms of power and status.

To top it all off, Paul's converts were navigating relationships with people of different genders in all the complex and diverse ways that people usually do this—as singles, betrothed, and then in various married situations, whether happily married, unhappily married, married to another Christian, or married to a pagan. Every community is always involved with these powerful relational dynamics which do not always play out smoothly.

In short, the Corinthian church was crisscrossed by significant differences. It was composed of people who were from an utterly pagan background, who were half-Jewish pagans (that is, converted God worshipers), and who were Jews. There were many poor converts but also a number of high-status and wealthy figures, along with their households. And as always, there were complicated gender dynamics surrounding sexual activity. These diverse Corinthian converts brought into their Christian community all the hostility, suspicion, and misunderstanding that arose from these differences in race, class, and gender. Paul's exhortations to the Corinthians simply to be nicer to one another didn't overcome these differences.

Moreover, there were problems of leadership that prevented the Corinthians from resolving their differences.

Paul composed 1 Corinthians carefully in five blocks of argument, each one of which addresses a cluster of related problems. But he began the letter with the heart of the matter: the partisan divisions in the Corinthian community. The Corinthians are factionalized. They have split up behind different leaders—principally behind Paul and Apollos, but also behind Peter, whom Paul calls Cephas, and there is possibly even some independent “Christ party” in view (1:12).

On one level this partisanship is entirely understandable. Partisanship was a standard feature of ancient Greco-Roman city life, and it hasn’t exactly gone away. The United States recently came through an extraordinary election in which both sides vilified their opposition. But things were even nastier in the ancient world. There was no liberal veneer to cover things over.

The bitter partisanship evident at Corinth is linked tightly with another feature of the community: life in the ancient city was a desperate struggle for survival and an equally desperate climb up the proverbial greasy pole to the top. The tiny number of people who inhabited the top 1 percent were survivors. They were highly competitive, aggressive, tough people who sat on those beneath them and fended off their rivals ruthlessly. They also used the considerable resources of Greco-Roman rhetoric to mock and denigrate their competitors. The unusual degree of factionalism in the Corinthian community is traceable in large measure to the handful of elite figures who are in it—the wealthy and highly educated converts that Paul and Apollos had made in and around the synagogue, including Gaius, Crispus, and Sosthenes. (The end of Paul’s letter to the Romans, written in Corinth, mentions another local politician, Erastus.) These local civic leaders were acting as they usually did, striving with one another for attention and influence in an intensely competitive fashion, all while preserving their privileges and status from the great unwashed who made up the rest of the congregation.

Another dimension in the poor behavior of the elite members of the Corinthian church comes through clearly in Paul’s long responses. In addition to their competitiveness, the Corinthians have a cultural view of leadership, and this problematized their relationship with Paul. Greco-Roman cities loved appearances. They loved what people looked like, how much money they had, their connections, and how they spoke. Fully trained rhetorical professionals could captivate audiences

for hours. They were the rock stars of the ancient world, and they commanded huge fees for their performances. They looked beautiful and spoke beautifully.

In one of the most profound passages he ever wrote, Paul points out that the Christian God revealed in the crucified Jesus could not be more different from this (1:18–2:16). By journeying down into the human condition and ultimately accepting a shameful death, Jesus revealed that God was a reaching God, an inclusive and gentle God who valued everyone, including the most despised and marginalized. Those whom society looked down on, God was especially concerned about and eager to reach. (The older theological term for this virtue was *condescension*, a word that has now been inverted into its opposite, being freighted with unhelpful connotations of superiority and haughtiness.) This is what a Christian leader should look like. It could hardly be more dramatically countercultural, and Paul lived out this leadership style in person.

He was not trained in the flashy tradition of Greco-Roman rhetoric. He had taken a somewhat unusual sectarian degree in advanced Jewish studies at an obscure regional university in Jerusalem. He was quite brilliant and a leader in his own tradition, being highly skilled in the things it valued. He could recall and manipulate scriptural texts at will. But he couldn't speak well, so he didn't sound like much to Greco-Roman snobs, and he looked like nothing. He was dirty, bedraggled, and unpaid. He labored away in small filthy workshops with his own hands. He might even have had an ongoing battle with some unsightly disease like acute conjunctivitis. This would have made his eyes red and weepy. In terms of appearances, then, he came across as a sickly handworker, just one step above a slave.

All of this led at least some of the local Corinthian leaders to disrespect Paul, and some of them probably despised him. They were embarrassed by his leadership and far preferred the more culturally impressive qualifications of a rhetorician like Apollos (see Acts 18:24–28). They had no intention of following his example and acting like servant leaders—living alongside their humble converts and caring for those who were weak and shamed. They threw their weight behind alternative, far more attractive leaders at Corinth, vilifying their founder. Sharp divisions ensued.

Paul's success in assembling a diverse church created the conditions for conflict.

In short, there was a dramatic failure of leadership at Corinth. The wealthy local converts who dominated the community were behaving as Greco-Roman leaders behaved. They were competing with one another for influence, status, and power—no love lost in this battle! Moreover, they were competing in the terms that their surrounding culture dictated, in terms of appearances and money, so they were undermining Paul's leadership as they elevated the merits of their patrons. In addition, they were continuing to despise and humiliate their social inferiors.

Paul points out at the beginning of 1 Corinthians—returning to the theme at many later points in the rest of the letter—that this behavior is a fundamental betrayal of Christian community. Christians are to love, support, and encourage one another, not compete with one another, and their leaders are to follow in the footsteps of the crucified Christ. The leader who reaches down to live alongside people, and who values and engages with the poor and the marginalized, is the true Christian leader. This is the “appearance” that matters.

We learn a lot from this Corinthian debacle. In small, relatively homogeneous communities like Philippi, Thessalonica, and Colossae, Paul's ethic didn't have to deal with the tensions created by deep social divisions. At Thessalonica, he had to deal with things like lazy community members. But in a larger, more diverse church like Corinth, Paul's ethic of kindness faced much tougher challenges. It had to overcome deep divisions of race, class, and gender present within the fabric of the community.

Here we see both the importance of Christian leadership and its true nature. Christian leaders can manage and heal these divisions, provided they act appropriately. They are to humble themselves and bridge existing social chasms, thereby drawing the community together behind them. But this type of leadership is deeply countercultural. It is hard to recognize, while cultural accounts of leadership in terms of status, wealth, and influence directly undermine this authentic account.

Sadly, there was another factor at work at Corinth that was closely related to the leadership failure, and it made things still worse. Some of the community leaders were intellectually arrogant. The elite status of some of Paul's converts presupposed an advanced education—the equivalent of a modern college degree—and some simply had the confidence that having a lot of money brings. As local community leaders in the city's politics, they were used to thinking about things and proposing policies and judgments. But they weren't as clever as they thought they were. They

were inferring what they thought were theologically appropriate Christian actions and behaviors, but they were jumping to conclusions and pushing them too hard. The results were destructive.

One group was correctly saying that food doesn't matter and the kingdom of God isn't a matter of meat and drink, but they turned their confidence into a weapon. Some of the Corinthians were Jews or were strongly committed to Jewish ways of living. They shared the general Jewish revulsion to meat that has been improperly prepared. Such meat would have been quite literally a nauseating prospect for them, and I imagine that they looked down their noses at anyone eating it. But our amateur theologians reversed this attitude and paid it back with interest. They happily ate their idol meat and mocked those who had a problem with it. "Such scruples. What fools!" (1 Cor. 8:1-13).

Paul corrects this insensitivity with his basic relational argument. Although it is technically correct that food doesn't matter to this degree anymore, such arrogance hardly possesses relational integrity. The kindness and consideration that he began the letter describing in relation to God and Jesus is not being followed here, as it should be.

In a second problematic act of intellectualism, the group pushed another maxim to extremes. "Idols don't actually exist," as the Bible repeatedly says, so there are no problems with attending idol feasts and worship events. It is not as if anything is actually there! In this way, the puffed-up ones, as Paul calls them, could continue to attend the plethora of idolatrous events that structured the ancient pagan city—its processions, feasts, festivals, and sacrifices.

Paul's style of leadership was not impressive to Greco-Roman elites.

To deal with this problem, Paul reintroduces the relationality and connectedness that these thinkers keep overlooking. Idols aren't anything, but these pagan events are intertwined with the evil powers that roam the cosmos outside the church. Pagan culture might not be what it says it is, but it is still dangerous. Attending an idolatrous worship event is creating a foolish vulnerability to evil, as well as being deeply unfaithful to God. Can we really attend a black Sabbath and escape unscathed? Can we walk in a national parade without thinking that a nation, a flag, or a history "is anything"? Paul instructs this group of Corinthians not to play with fire (1 Cor. 10:1-22).

Paul's final extended argument in the letter (15:1-58) addresses the denial of Jesus' bodily resurrection, and our intellectuals are probably in view here again. Some strands of ancient Greek thinking disparaged matter and material things. They believed that only the unseen world of the spirit was important. Spirit was pure and eternal; matter was impure and transitory. Spiritual things had been trapped in material things the way we might get our car stuck in a mudslide. The right way forward was to get the car out of the mud and hose it off. For people thinking in this fashion, Jesus' bodily resurrection made no sense. He was spirit. He'd had his material things, including his body, hosed off by death, so technically there was no bodily resurrection. Who needs a bodily resurrection? The whole idea is absurd.

Paul is rather horrified by this line of thinking. He argues at length that if Jesus has not been raised bodily, then no one has been saved from their sins and their other problems, including death. But he also argues that the body with which Jesus has been raised is not like our bodies, which are mortal and die. It is a glorious, imperishable, spiritual body. Moreover, even as we occupy our present locations, we must pay constant attention to what our current imperfect bodies are doing. Paul has earlier spoken of being careful not to bring our bodies into contact with prostitutes and idolatrous worship festivals (1 Cor. 6:12-20). Here, too, he is saying that bodies matter.

Questions generated by sex and gender roiled the Corinthians, and they roil us still today. There isn't space here to consider the fascinating ways Paul navigated the issue of appropriate sexual behavior with the Corinthians, but it's a topic worthy of further consideration elsewhere.

Even without considering Paul's discussions of sex and gender, we have learned three critically important things from our study of the Corinthians. First, Paul's ethic of Christian love was deeply countercultural and highly demanding. Homogeneous and idealized communities mask how tough it is to practice this kindness and consideration across social divisions where it needs to bridge and heal and not merely to fit into a group that already gets along quite well. Corinth exposes this countercultural challenge.

Second, local Christian leadership is critical to this process. This leadership must be formed on Christ's leadership, modeled by Paul and his students. Conventional assessments of value must be abandoned. Conventional competitive relations must be repented of. This recalibration of what an authentic leader looks like is very

difficult. Every community has elites, and invariably throughout history those elites have contested for status in terms of conventional markers. Paul challenges the Corinthians and us to do things differently. The deeply countercultural challenge of Christian behavior is exposed by Corinth here again, although it also reveals as no other community does the need for good leaders if a diverse Christian community is to move forward.

Third, we learn that intellectualism is damaging when it comes in the form of aggressive theological and ethical judgments that are separated from right relating and from the right depth in the Jewish tradition. It creates further differences that become places of further tension, dispute, and conflict. Christian thinking must not be separated from Christian acting in relation to other Christians. Neither must it be separated from a broad and rich account of the community rooted in Judaism. Above all, it must not suppose that our bodies do not matter. We act through our bodies, so everything they do is important.

In sum, the Christian way asks all its followers to be kind and considerate toward one another. It asks its leaders to be sensitive to “the least of these”—if necessary, living alongside them. These actions are fairly simple in theory but incredibly demanding in practice. They are deeply countercultural. If they are to take root, above all they require the right sort of leadership. Christian leaders must help their communities navigate their current locations ethically with due depth, sensitivity, and courage, as Paul did for the Corinthians.

A version of this article appears in the January 3 print edition under the title “Culture wars at Corinth.” It was adapted from Douglas A. Campbell’s book Paul: An Apostle’s Journey, forthcoming from Eerdmans. The article was edited on January 4 to reflect the most current scholarship on wealth and poverty in the ancient world.