



1 COR INTH IANS

Searching the Depths of God



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CHAPTER 1

CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

CORINTH

Paul established house churches in Corinth around 50 CE. According to 1 Corinthians 5:9 he had also written another letter, which scholars refer to as “the lost letter.” So, really, our “1 Corinthians” is at least his *second* letter, written around 54 CE. Most scholars find in our 2 Corinthians multiple letters, perhaps including the “lost letter” of 1 Corinthians 5:9, which some believe is found in 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1. Long story short, Paul made two visits and wrote four letters to this church that he loved so very dearly. The Corinthians caused him to feel a wide array of emotions, from tears of pain, to anger, to tenderness and, most of all, love. In the middle of a gut-wrenching exchange where he is addressing the conflict between him and them, he declares: “I will most gladly spend and be spent for you” (2 Corinthians 12:15).

I can't imagine a more beautiful or concise statement of what Christian love entails. First Corinthians 12:2 indicates that the recipients of the letter were Gentiles (that is, not Jews), though surely there was a synagogue in Corinth. In fact, when you visit the ancient site of Corinth today, you will see an inscription that suggests as much, since part of the phrase “synagogue of the Hebrews” is etched on it. Corinth was quite an important city in Paul's

time. Although it had been destroyed in 146 BCE, in 44 BCE Julius Caesar established it as a Roman colony. Then, in 27 BCE, it became the capital of the whole region of Achaia (refer to a map of the Mediterranean world in your study Bible). Corinth was a multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual, multireligious place, not unlike our own.

WHY DID PAUL WRITE THE LETTER?

Why did Paul write 1 Corinthians? There are clues in the text. First, he received an oral report from “Chloe’s people” (1:11). In Paul’s time Christians met in house churches, not dedicated buildings. Early Christianity was unusual in that people of different economic strata gathered together in community; so, the Christians with financial resources hosted the church in their homes. Chloe likely was a woman of her own means (no male is mentioned) who led a church in her home. Incidentally, I named my daughter after this strong woman (not after a perfume or a Kardashian, thank you very much). Women in leadership are absolutely typical for Paul.

Second, the Corinthians wrote him a letter asking him to address issues occurring in their own community. How do we know? By the phrase “Now concerning” [*peri de*]; see, for example, 1 Corinthians 7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1. Every time you encounter this phrase it means that Paul has moved on to a new topic about which the Corinthians consulted him. In other words, 1 Corinthians is an “occasional letter,” which is to say Paul wrote it to a specific congregation in a specific historical context that was experiencing specific problems (that other congregations may or may not have been experiencing). He didn’t set out to write a systematic theology, like John Calvin or Karl Barth did, in which he addresses all topics for all time. Nor did he imagine he was writing something that would later become Scripture. In fact, Paul himself thought that the world was ending very soon. As it turns out, the world didn’t end, and such occasional letters did become part of Scripture, in large part because our Christian ancestors decided that

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there was enough in them that applied to other churches in different times and places. Sure, we Christians no longer divide the world into such hierarchical, binary categories as Jew and Gentile or slave and master, nor do we lose sleep about eating or avoiding meat sacrificed to idols. But we definitely have our own binaries, hierarchies, and conundrums over how much and in what ways a Christian should participate in civil religion, how we are to use our freedom in Christ, and how we treat fellow Christians who may be different from us in worldview. We'll unpack that when we discuss 1 Corinthians 8–10.

Third, in 1 Corinthians 16:17, we learn that Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus have come from Corinth in person to meet with Paul about the problems. It's important to know that, thanks to the Roman road system, early Christians were able to travel widely and even developed a system of hospitality including hotels and hospitals along the way. This aided the spread of the gospel. It allowed Paul to travel extensively and establish churches; as Frederick Buechner puts it, “He planted churches the way Johnny Appleseed planted trees.”¹ Sometimes Paul is even referred to as “the second founder of Christianity”—though we should note that he did not establish the churches in Rome, Alexandria, or Antioch, three crucial centers of early Christianity.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE LETTER

When we write letters, we follow conventions. Imagine you are the chair of the youth department at your church and are writing a fundraising

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letter to raise money for the youth ministry. How would you start off? Dear So-and-So (whether you know them or not, you will call them “Dear” out of convention). You then state your name and what office or position you are writing from, such that the recipient should listen to you. Then you thank them for their generosity or other virtues you have seen them display in the past that give you the confidence to believe that they will respond to the observations, information, and request you are about to make. Only after building the connection will you move to “the ask.” You write the body of the letter in the conventional form of your society: paragraphs. You end with a kind word and a conventional closing (Sincerely, Best Wishes, Blessings) and sign your name.

Paul’s letters follow the letter-writing conventions of his own day. They open with a greeting from the sender(s)—in this case Paul and Sosthenes—to the church(es) in question. He wishes them grace and peace and then moves into what scholars identify as the thanksgiving period of a Pauline letter, which has three functions. First, it gives thanks; the Greek word is *eucharistō* and, as you can see, we get the word “Eucharist” from it. Second, it builds bonds across the distance, just as we do when we write a letter to a friend. Third, it signals the main points of the letter.

In 1 Corinthians 1:4-9, the thanksgiving portion of this letter, what major themes do we find foreshadowed? For one, Paul mentions spiritual gifts. How are spiritual gifts functioning in Corinth? “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift,” he says (1:7), but he’s getting ready to admonish them on that topic because they are actually using their gifts for their own egos, not for gracing the world. And what about “In every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind” (1:5)? Paul launches right into that in chapter 1 and he confronts them because their use of knowledge, far from enlightening and illuminating and improving the community, just makes them full of themselves. Their use of knowledge does not serve the cause of love. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (8:1).

A caveat is in order here. Paul never eschews the importance of knowledge and learning and reason; in fact, he commands Christians to engage in the life of the mind (Romans 12:2), and he himself is extremely educated. There's not an anti-intellectual bone in his body. Any knowledge, training, or skill can be used for good or ill, can build up or destroy, can serve or enslave others. We are invited to use our powers for good, for God.

After the thanksgiving, Paul's letters include a body, which contains the main business of the letter, followed by a closing, which includes personal greetings similar to those we might include in the opening of a friendly letter today. In 1 Corinthians, Paul spends the body of the letter addressing various issues and concerns. He concludes with a little flair—a kind of Alfred Hitchcock cameo appearance or a John Hancock move: “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand” (unlike the rest of the letter, that is; 16:21). He then pronounces a curse on some people and commands the recipients to kiss each other, both elements I plan to leave in the first century. He ends on love “in Christ Jesus” (16:24). And why wouldn't he? If this letter is about anything, it's about the Logic of Love, Jesus-style.

THE LOGIC OF THE CROSS: CHRIST'S BODY IN CORINTH (1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-25)

The “logic of the cross,” as Paul calls it: “For on the one hand, the logic of the cross [*ho logos o tou staurou*] is foolishness to the ones who are in the process of perishing; but on the other hand, to the ones who are in the process of being healed/saved, it is the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18, my translation). I'm sorry that translations empty the force of the phrase *logos tou staurou* with something like “the message about the cross” (NRSV). We get the word “logic” from *logos*. What's at stake for Paul here is that we live with intention, on purpose, logically—not just with *any* intention or purpose or logic, but with that which derives from the values on

What's at stake for Paul here is that we live with intention, on purpose, logically—not just with any intention or purpose or logic, but with that which derives from the values on display in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It's the Logic of Love.

display in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It's the Logic of Love, of reconciliation with God and one another and all of creation.

This Logic of the Cross clashes strongly with other logics we are exposed to daily, which is why Paul uses the rhetorical technique of *contrast* so often in an effort to get our attention and clarify the choices before us. He contrasts not only destruction and healing, but also foolishness and wisdom. And this leads to another technique he relies on heavily: *irony*. For Paul, the Christian life of discipleship is nothing if not ironic. I couldn't agree more. Things are not as they appear. What seems wise to the world (looking out for number one; acting as though your choices don't affect others; the one who dies with the most toys wins) is actually foolishness by God's standards. What seems foolish to the world (compassion and connection; regarding each person as equally valuable regardless of social status; following a crucified Messiah) is wisdom in God's estimation.

The Corinthians have a host of issues in their community, but there's one solution to them all: adopt the Logic of the Cross. In the pages ahead, we'll unpack what that looks like on the ground in concrete practical situations. For now, it's important to highlight several points.

First, Paul presents the cross as the paradigm of power (again, irony). He contrasts and defines (or we might say “redefines”) power and weakness. Crucifying Jesus of Nazareth was nothing unusual for the Roman soldiers who went to work that day—just another day at the office. By the world's

logic, Rome was the paragon of power that day and Jesus the epitome of weakness; Caesar won. The Logic of the Cross says otherwise. The gospel declares not only that Caesar (or any earthly leader) is not God (though many will try to convince us otherwise), but also that God's version of power prevails when all is said and done.

Far from this being a mere doctrinal belief for Paul, Paul had his own personal experience of the ironic redefinition of power and weakness. He, too, experienced bodily pain, disfigurement, even a "thorn in the flesh" (most likely a physical impairment) for which he was maligned. He writes to the Corinthians about it, again contrasting and redefining power and weakness for them through the words of God: "Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:8–10).

Second, the cross contrasts and redefines wisdom and foolishness. Third, the cross is the point of unity for Christians. It provides their identity and dictates their morality. It is the central metaphor of the Christian faith for Paul. Where the cross is effective, love [*agapē*] and fellowship [*koinonia*] reign. Read chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians, and you'll get what I mean.

CHALLENGES: INFIGHTING AND SPIRITUAL IMMATURITY (1 CORINTHIANS 1–2)

Divisions, bickering, cliques, religious know-it-alls. Paul tackles these issues from the start because they underlie all of the other problems in some way or another. Reread 1 Corinthians 1:10–17. Here, Paul addresses "divisions" and "quarrels" among the Corinthians. Far from having the tone of a

Model UN debate in which people disagree respectfully and maturely based upon genuinely good and reasoned arguments, Paul depicts his Corinthian siblings more in terms of junior high cliques dedicated to their favorite Instagram influencer of the moment: “What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ’” (1:12). I have to admit that the last faction really went for it. It reminds me of a church I used to pass by every day driving my kids to school called the “True Christian Church.” Okay, you win.

SOLUTION: UNITY IN CHRIST (NOT UNIFORMITY)

The solution is unity and humility, both of which are contained in the Logic of the Cross. When we start talking about “unity” and “humility,” some may feel unsure how to apply these heady theoretical, churchy words. Some may fear that they call for a lot of work with potentially little payoff. Some may fear that their own needs and desires will get eclipsed or dismissed. Some may even understand these concepts as a call to become a doormat for someone else.

Such is the rhetoric of the ego (from the Greek word *egō*, meaning I), or what Paul often refers to as “the flesh” (which we’ll define here as the “false self”). If you’ve done anything with the Enneagram or Richard Rohr, that definition is probably familiar. My PhD is in New Testament, not psychology, so I’ll stay in my lane here and tell you with certainty that Paul never became a doormat or stopped having strong convictions. What he discovered was the truth of Jesus’s ironic words about losing in order to gain, dying in order to live. This is a man who was the top of his class at the best school, winning every medal, crushing it left and right.

I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:

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circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.

Philippians 3:4-9

Over and over, in a variety of ways, Paul tries to get at these points:

1. We all have spiritual gifts. Literally, we are all “God’s gift to the world.” The very reason God gave us gifts is to contribute to the flourishing of all God’s creation.
2. Some people are stuck in shame and don’t recognize that they are God’s gift. They play small and hide and need to be encouraged to step up to the plate and shine their light. If you want sin language, this could be called “the sin of hiding.” They might benefit from reading Marianne Williamson’s words:

‘Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.’ We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn’t serve the world. There’s nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us; it’s in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously

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give other people permission to do the same. As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.²

3. Other people struggle with the opposite—they could regale you for hours with proof that they are God's gift. They are tempted to be arrogant and self-centered and to use their gifts for self-promotion. They mistakenly imagine that their success is to be credited to them alone or that it as a joint effort between them and the God who so especially extra-gifted them. They balk at the idea that anyone else or even a community or a society contributed to their success. This could be called "the sin of pride." They might benefit from reading, well, 1 Corinthians.
4. As counterintuitive, or ironic, as it might feel to many of us, unity and humility do not diminish us; rather, they liberate us. When we understand that we are, by God's design, connected to all God's creation, it means that together, we are more than we could be on our own. When we realize that, by God's design, we are each gifted in certain ways (and not in others), we can relax into that fact without envying someone else or pretending to be something we aren't. We are honest—but not arrogant—about our gifts and glad to name and appreciate those we find in others. That's unity and humility.

The Corinthians can't see the forest for the trees. What would it be like if they could set aside their bickering on the ground and view reality from God's perspective ("on earth as it is in heaven," in Jesus's words)? They would get the big picture. Notice that Paul does not capitalize on the loyalty of the "Paul faction" to one-up his colleagues or promote himself. Quite the opposite—he redirects their loyalty away from him and to Christ, as all good Christian leaders do in all times and places. If possible, read it out loud to get the full effect, especially verse 16, which makes me smile with the

interjected “aside” that appears in parentheses (you, my reader, can probably already deduce that I’m a fan of asides). It really is like Paul himself is there with them:

Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

1 Corinthians 1:13-17

I note two points regarding unity in 1 Corinthians 1–4. First, Paul models cooperation instead of competition, noting that he and the other leaders cooperate in order to build something grand, a Christian community. Here’s part of what he says:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God’s servants, working together; you [plural] are God’s field, God’s building.

1 Corinthians 3:5-9

The unity is found in the “working together” toward the “common purpose” of growing and building a community. As Paul will make clear in 1 Corinthians 13, that community is to be marked by the greatest virtue of all: not hope, and, surprisingly perhaps, not even faith—no, the greatest of these is *love*. Sure, Paul and Apollos do their part with their gifts, but the results depend on God. The Corinthians themselves, as a community, are

How do they resist the cult of personality and narcissism and hunger for power that can come from followers who idolize them? Paul says there's only one way—adopt the Logic of the Cross.

God's field and God's building. Notice the word "you" is plural ("y'all") and not singular—this is about a community, not just individual people.

Second, how are Paul and Apollos able to be grounded and humble, spiritually mature, working together instead of competing, understanding that one plants and another waters and neither is better or worse than the other? How do they resist the cult of personality and narcissism and hunger for power that can come from followers who idolize them? Paul says there's only one way—adopt the Logic of the Cross: "When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:1-2). (Refer to "The Christ Hymn" of Philippians 2:5-11, where Paul calls the community to "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" [Philippians 2:5]).

To have "the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16) is to practice choosing love and humility over and over again. Division and bickering seem to come easily, even though they cause stress, not peace. Unity takes intentional practice. Disagreement arises over what should be considered essential or nonessential, and I'm guessing you could name an example or two from your own community this moment. Healthy disagreement can lead to insight and growth. It can lead to a decision for those in disagreement to part ways with one another maturely and form new productive partnerships with others.

How can we possibly discern what's essential and what's not? Paul reminds us that we have the Holy Spirit to guide our communal

discernment, should we be open to it. We can have the mind of Christ because here and now and always we have access to the Holy Spirit: “Y’all know that y’all are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells among y’all, right?” (1 Corinthians 3:16, my translation). Truly spiritual people don’t boast about how spiritual they are since the ego has moved aside to make room for the Spirit. As Paul says: “the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Corinthians 2:10). This same Spirit is the one that teaches human beings all we need to know about God and provides us access to direct encounters and experiences of God, many of which cannot be expressed fully by finite human language and categories of knowledge. It is by this Spirit “that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God” (1 Corinthians 2:12).

As we work toward discernment and unity, I recall Augustine of Hippo, who is credited with saying: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love.” The last clause is an excellent place to begin (and end): love. It calls to mind 1 Corinthians 13:13: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” The Logic of the Cross is the Logic of Love; thus at every moment, in times of peace or in times of conflict, we can ask if we are regarding the other person or group with love.

FULL OF THE SPIRIT OR JUST HOT AIR? (1 CORINTHIANS 3)

I find it encouraging that Paul simultaneously calls the Corinthians saints and spiritual babies who are so immature that he can only give them spiritual milk at the moment (I also like that here, as elsewhere, Paul depicts himself as a nursing mother):

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food.

1 Corinthians 3:1-2

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There's certainly nothing wrong with starting out life as a baby, where everything is new and you are the center of the world. My granddaughter is five weeks old as I write this. For one month her parents have been pouring nonstop energy into her and, in return, she's rewarding all their hard work by sleeping, eating, and creating diaper-changing opportunities, just like she's supposed to. If she develops along a typical path, she will discover her power and her talents, and we will hear a fair amount of, "Hey, watch me! Watch me again!" She will eventually grow up, eat solid food, and learn that she is not the only show in town (and her grandparents will try not to insist that her show is still the best). She will learn how not just to be served but to serve others as well. She will mature and assume her place in God's order of things, helping to grow and build God's field, God's building.

Ironically, some of the key problems in the Corinthian church were caused by the self-designated "spiritual people" [*pneumatikoi*]. *Pneuma* is a Greek word that means spirit, breath, or wind, and these people were definitely full of hot air. Paul describes them as "puffed up" [*physiō*; 1 Corinthians 4:6]. Stop here and fill your cheeks up with air, and then say out loud forcefully, FOO-SEE-AH-OH. It's onomatopoeia, where the word sounds like the thing itself (like "buzz"). If there's one takeaway warning from 1 Corinthians, let it be this—do NOT be FOO-SEE-AH-OH. Isn't Greek fun?

According to Paul, the claims of the *pneumatikoi* are threefold: (1) they have knowledge (*gnōsis*, a word that comes up a lot in 1 Corinthians); (2) they are spiritual [*pneumatikoi*]; (3) as a result, they believe they have freedom to behave any way they want no matter how it affects others. They fancy themselves superior to others and accountable to no one. They are full of themselves, they boast, they are "puffed up," they cause factiousness, and they contribute to numerous moral problems and personal hurt in the church. As we will learn later, their motto is "all things are lawful for me."

Paul responds, “All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are *beneficial*” (1 Corinthians 6:12, emphasis added).

They link their wisdom with the possession of the Spirit and they use it to act immorally and boast about it. Paul insists that those with true wisdom (read 1 Corinthians 2:10), those who understand the cross, are the mature Christians whose possession of the Spirit leads to cooperation and humility.

Reread 3:18-23 and pay attention to how the themes of wisdom versus foolishness and divisions (around Paul, Apollos, and so forth) versus cooperation in Christ come together and wrap up everything Paul’s been getting at. Notice how he uses irony, paradox, and contrast. It’s really quite brilliant and inspiring.

If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God....

So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

1 Corinthians 3:18-23

We can breathe into humility, aware of and grateful for our particular gifts, knowing our place in the family of things, confident in our unbroken, unbreakable connection to all that has ever been or will be, knowing that, finally, it all begins and ends with God, all depends on God. How freeing.

“AND FURTHERMORE”: PAUL’S LEADERSHIP STYLE (1 CORINTHIANS 4)

I remember my counselor Rachel helping me work through parenting a teenager. I would present the issue at hand and she would ask me how

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I might respond. “Well, I would probably say” and then I’d launch into my proposed speech. Then Rachel would say: “Fewer words. They aren’t listening after twenty seconds.” In addition to keeping it brief, the trick was to avoid being “judgy Jaime” and, instead, convey the message using the skills of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), established by Marshall B. Rosenberg. On my best days, I would go home and do just that and while it may not compare to Paul’s eloquent rhetoric in 1 Corinthians 3:18-23, I’d say it wasn’t half bad and harmony and connection won the day. On my less effective days, not trusting that positive, inviting approach to be compelling enough, I’d go on to add some (very wordy) potential threats and ultimatums, just in case.

Reading 1 Corinthians 4 shows me that Paul himself had such days. There he moves from irony to outright sarcasm and trades transcendence for threat. The Corinthian Christians think they are “all that” and they boast about how blessed they are as evidenced by their charmed, superior lives that, clearly, they especially deserve. Paul replies, “Really. Wow. Interesting. If that’s the standard we’re using, if that’s what wisdom really looks like, then I guess that makes us apostles fools.” He puts them in their place by contrasting these arrogant fractious folks with him and Apollos.

I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, “Nothing beyond what is written,” so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

1 Corinthians 4:6-7, emphasis added

Then comes the sarcasm. If you are able, read it aloud and emphasize the words I’ve emphasized. The “already” emphasizes that they truly believe they’ve “arrived,” as we say. The *we* and *you* are to show the ironic contrast:

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Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you! For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute.

1 Corinthians 4:8-10, emphasis added

Now for the time-honored parent guilt: “I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel” (vv. 14-15). Then comes the “I taught you better than this” move. In verses 16-17 Paul reminds the Corinthians that they have the example of Paul himself and that he has sent Timothy along to remind them of what they have learned and how that connects them to the wider Christian community beyond their hometown. Finally, the “don’t make me come in there” threat: “What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (v. 21). Paul may just need a refresher course in NVC!

Joking aside, in all of his letters Paul demonstrates deep commitment and concern for those in the churches he establishes. He considers them family, referring to himself sometimes as a sibling, sometimes a father, sometimes a wet nurse who breastfeeds them, sometimes a mother (consult Galatians 4:19). All are very intimate, involved descriptors.

In addition to relating to his people as family, a second tactic Paul uses is pointing them to good examples of discipleship. Sometimes that entails following his lead, as in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Become imitators of me just as I am an imitator of Christ” (my translation). Imitating Paul as he imitates Jesus certainly gives our lives meaningful shape and purpose, but it likely also leads to some amount of suffering, sacrifice, and interpersonal conflict.

Paul knew for certain that if we're going to stay the course with any perseverance, joy, or hope, we're going to have to do it together.

Standing up to the powers that be in the church and in the world on behalf of the “weak in the world,” the “low and despised in the world,” whom God has chosen in a very intentional specific way (1 Corinthians 1:27-28) may not win us approval from anyone but God; but what other approval is worth seeking anyway?

Paul knew for certain that if we're going to stay the course with any perseverance, joy, or hope, we're going to have to do it *together*. Some people have the impression that Paul was an autocrat, but the evidence proves quite the opposite. He cooperates and networks and depends upon an innumerable list of people. Notice that almost every Pauline letter is actually cowritten. For example, he cowrites 1 Corinthians with Sosthenes. Think of fellow workers he names just in 1 Corinthians alone (Timothy, Chloe, Apollos, Cephas) as he writes about the way one plants and another waters. If you really want to absorb this point, just read through Romans 16 where you will be astonished by the team effort on display.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In this chapter, we have oriented ourselves to Corinth, the Corinthians, and Paul's correspondence with them. We have determined that the Logic of the Cross, which is the Logic of Love, is the overarching theme of the letter, the drumbeat that sounds throughout the letter and gives it coherence. We focused on the issue of divisions raised in these chapters along with Paul's proposed solutions. We also gave attention to the way Paul goes about pastoring them, his style, strategy, and some tactics. As we turn our

CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

attention to 1 Corinthians 5–7 in the next chapter, we will take everything we've learned in this chapter along with us, building upon that foundation and expanding our inquiry. The chapters ahead will touch upon an array of other joys and challenges that the community experienced. Let's discover what they have to teach us in light of our own context.

First Corinthians is Paul's wildest letter, as Paul speaks to petty rivalry, spiritual ecstasy, and sexual experimentation, among other issues. Jaime Clark-Soles boils down Paul's message to the "Logic of the Cross," the revolutionary love God demonstrates through Jesus. Clark-Soles constantly invites us to imagine what love looks like amidst the messiness of our own culture. We all need teachers like Jaime Clark-Soles.

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—MARGARET AYMER, First Presbyterian Shreveport Church, D. Thomason Professor of New Testament Studies



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