



A New Look at Corinthians

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Over the years, assumptions have been made based on the many commentaries of the first letter to the Corinthians. But now I realise that *we* need to start examining the information that's in front of us for ourselves. *We* need to analyse the circumstances and the people who played a part in the writing of this long letter – the people who were with Paul at the time. That is what I hope to do here, by considering not just the events described, but also the personalities and circumstances surrounding them.¹

Whenever I have read Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, I have pictured Paul writing or dictating this letter in a quiet little room, possibly even a prison cell, many miles away from the people of Corinth. (There is good evidence that he was in Ephesus at the time.) I don't know about you, but when I receive a letter, I read it privately and, if possible, I put it aside ready to be answered at my leisure.

So I assumed that this was what Paul would do, too, until a chance remark during a Bible discussion changed that notion drastically. You see, someone commented that Chloe is only mentioned once in the letter and that's all we know about her. When I checked this out, I realised that even though she isn't named, there is evidence of Chloe and her household contained *all through* Paul's letter. I also realised that it's highly unlikely that he wrote it privately at all.

A Fabulous Start

The letter itself starts with a wonderful statement of faith from Paul, reminding all of the congregation in Corinth that each one of them had been given all the knowledge and gifts from God that were needed to keep them firm in their faith.

¹ Throughout, I will use the Biblica sponsored online NIV as they endeavour to keep the language both accurate and up to date.

For in him you have been enriched in every way – with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge.... Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. (1Cor 1:5,7)

Very uplifting stuff and inclusive of every member of the group of believers in Corinth, teaching them that they were all good enough. Then we come to verse 11 and the ground shifts dramatically. Paul writes,

My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. (I Cor 1:11)

Now this sets a very different scene. Members of Chloe's household in Corinth have travelled all the way to Paul, to bring him devastating news about people he had trusted to live as Christians in Corinth. Chloe might well have travelled with them, like Phoebe the Deaconess mentioned in Romans 16. These people had travelled over 500 km on foot and by boat which even today would take nearly 70 hours. They did not make such a long and dangerous journey just to swap pleasantries with Paul.

Chloe's Household

Let's take a look at Chloe's household. Some translate 'household' as 'people'. Whether it's Chloe's household or Chloe's people, the fact remains that Chloe is obviously very important in Corinth among the Christians. How can I be so sure? Firstly, Paul names her – which implies that her status is such that the bullies won't round on her! Next, she evidently had the means to finance this trip to Ephesus, which would have necessitated releasing her people from their normal duties. There is also considered to be a strong likelihood that she allowed the believers to meet in her house which would account for the urgency of her sending to Paul if there were problems. Personally, I find anger in others very intimidating, and the idea of quarrels and shouting occurring from people visiting my home would be extremely worrying to me. Whether it was in Chloe's house or somebody else's, it's pretty alarming anyway and shouldn't happen in Christian circles.

On the surface that's practically all we think we know about Chloe or those messengers. It's very easy to picture a group of people who cheerfully drop in on the church's founder to say, *Hi, and by the way, there's been a spot of bother in Corinth – here's a letter about it*, before disappearing

from the narrative. Yet we know from what Paul writes next that he was extremely well-informed and knew exactly what was going on.

So let's take a look at the things Paul and his visitors must have discussed.

The Nature of the Quarrels

What happened after verse 11? Paul quickly outlines the nature of the quarrels using language that suggests that he had been party to a rather animated conversation. Hence you have him saying in verse 12:

What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." (1Cor 1:12)

It is easy to imagine the visitors explaining it to Paul in person. He roundly condemns this infighting and identifies the key influences that have caused these factions to distort the gospel message of love and redemption in Corinth. We can see that in verses 18 to 20. One of the things he says is,

Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (1Cor 1:20)

There are three areas of concern:

1. people mistakenly considered as wise,
2. people who teach the Jewish law, and
3. Greek philosophers.

Now, all of those rubbed shoulders in Corinth, and Paul was evidently disappointed that this adulation of particular types of people not only still *existed* but was causing *friction* amongst the believers. He builds on this viewpoint by stating,

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.... For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. (1Cor 1:22-23,25)

It is very important that these facts are understood. They must have been of grave concern to Chloe, for her to turn to her church's founder. Throughout his letter, Paul *states* and then *dismantles* the divisive ideas coming from the Jewish and Greek Christians in Corinth. That's why

I would encourage you to picture the visitors from Chloe's household discussing the problems with Paul while he sits at his desk and begins his letter or takes notes.

Dipping into single chapters and verses can make Paul's letter seem long and disjointed to us, especially as Paul did not divide his letter into chapters at all. Like Paul, we need to stick to the immediacy of the issues in question.

Just to recap, by the end of chapter 1 of 1st Corinthians, Paul has established that he has not only received an urgent request for help because of bad behaviour taking place in Corinth, but that he has established the root of the problems, too.

The Boasters

In chapters 2 and 3, Paul emphasises the work of the Holy Spirit working through Christians. Then at the end of chapter 3 he says,

So then, no more boasting about human leaders! (1Cor 3:21)

We can imagine the visitors to Paul shaking their heads as they told this first hand: *They are boasting and arguing. Some are very forceful in their words, which is upsetting Chloe and those of us who know that followers of Jesus shouldn't be like that.*

So now we have the problem even more clearly set out for us – some believers in Corinth were not growing spiritually because they were loudly and boastfully employing the arguments, beliefs, and methods used in their previous Jewish and Greek cultures.

It seems that Christians in Corinth were resorting to worldly ways – like boasting – to take advantage of other Christians like Chloe and her people.

Being Like Jesus

So we need to think about being like Jesus. Chapter 4 is about how real Christians were supposed to behave. Paul writes it from his own example,

We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world – right up to this moment. (1Cor 4:12,13)

For Paul to say that, the visitors must have stated something like this: *Paul, some of them are downright lazy as well as argumentative. They hurl abuse at each other and don't back down. It's a nightmare, Paul! Chloe asks them very nicely to stop and consider Jesus, but they scoff at her too!*

So Paul talks about their arrogance and then tells them how they should be behaving:

- work hard,
- bless instead of cursing,
- put up with ill treatment, and
- answer those who slander with kindness.

Wouldn't it be easy to shelve those bullet points to apply to non-Christians? But Paul is indeed talking about Christian behaviour. In fact, the whole letter is a critique of how members of the Corinthian church were treating each other.

Criminals in the Ecclesia

It gets worse. Much worse.

In chapters 5 and 6, Paul gets to some really terrible problems that have been reported to him – immorality, greed, swindling, and idolatry, followed by using the very people they despise in the world to judge their problems in the Corinthian courts, in the hope of making financial retribution. *One brother takes another to court – and this in front of unbelievers! (1Cor 6:6)*

(Women were excluded from the courts altogether.)

Make no mistake, criminal behaviour needs to be eradicated from any Christian community, but not, in Paul's opinion, by involving the Greek or Jewish courts. There was a reason for him to shun the court system of the 1st century. There were about three legal systems in play – Greek, Jewish, and Roman.

To go to Jewish law was a very retrograde step for the new Christian church and would be widely hailed as a failure for the new Christian religion. The Greek law system was coupled with the Roman court system and mostly seems to have been used to settle land and inheritance disputes with the focus on getting retribution for the victim following a trial by jury. (Think of Paul's own skirmish with the Corinthian court system in Acts 18.) Women had no chance of retribution anyway, as they had no status and were forced to rely on the judgement of their spouse or a male guardian.

Thank goodness that so many countries today support a decent system of law and order for dealing with criminals!

Make no mistake, we are not talking about trivial issues regarding clothing worn or not worn by a brother or sister or people missing a service or two, we are talking about criminal acts like sexual abuse and assault. Paul states in chapter 5,

But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people. (1Cor 5:11)

Paul is talking about people who were openly bringing criminal behaviour right into the gatherings of believers.

Problems in Married Life

When we read chapter 7 of the letter, we can imagine the visitor from Chloe's household saying, *Paul, some are saying people should divorce their spouses if they're not Christians! Some are telling the men that if they are not circumcised they need to be!* (No wonder they were upset.)

There seems to have been great encouragement in the first churches for Christians to stay single and celibate. This is very foreign to our modern ears, but celibacy was a big thing in early Christianity. Because of this, Paul goes into the pros and cons of being husbands and wives.

He also tells them that they are not to change their situation, e.g. by divorcing an unbelieving spouse. It's a great example he cites: *Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. (1Cor 7:18)*

This is all glossed over very quickly in our modern gentile congregations, but just think of the practicality of what he's saying – if you've been circumcised, a reversal is not a possibility. It's laughable to suggest it – and Paul wrote it to drive the message home about change.

Nobody needed to change their situation when they became a believer. Remember Jesus' comments to soldiers who believed? He didn't tell them to leave their occupation but that they were not to extort money (Lk 3:14). Paul goes on to apply this to slaves, speaking to them very positively.

Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you – although if you can gain your freedom, do so. ... You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings. (1Cor 7:21,23)

I think this is wonderful and applies to all of us today, too. We were bought at a price and should not be forced to obey human beings instead of Jesus.

Then Paul extends this freedom to women:

If her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is – and I think that I too have the Spirit of God. (1Cor 7:39b,40)

Note the 'anyone she wishes' – in a time of arranged marriages this absolutely bucks the trend. He is giving men and women equal status. The condition that the new partner must be a believer is understandable but failure to marry a believer is not cited as a reason to throw the widow out of the church.

The qualifying 'and I think that I too have the Spirit of God' implies that another problem existed, i.e., various members of the church were dictating to others what they should or should not be doing on the strength of their own claims to have the Spirit of God. Paul has already said that *everyone* is learning to live by listening to the Spirit of God, not just a select few. Paul has to be very firm with them.

Who Can Eat What?

Then we come to who can eat what. In chapters 8 and 9, we can imagine the visitor from Chloe's household: *Paul, some of them still go into the temples and eat their food there!*

These chapters are about a specifically Roman-Empire-based problem – whether to eat food sacrificed to idols or not. All across the Roman Empire citizens were instructed to worship the Caesars in that way. Not following the Roman custom was going to get you noticed for lack of respect to Roman officialdom, and by the end of the 1st century this led to torture and death.

Paul's main concern is that some Christian believers will fall back into idolatry if they see another believer 'eating in an idol's temple' (1Cor 8:10).

It must have been hugely tempting to simply obey Roman law and eat food in the temple – imagine the pressure that believers would face from their own families and neighbours. Alas, for

some, going back to the temple would mean giving up Christianity altogether. Please note that this has *nothing* to do with any practice inside a Christian church today. It is referring to a particular regime where worship inside a pagan temple became compulsory.

Looking After the Apostles

In chapter 9, we can imagine these members of Chloe's household saying, *Paul, they even criticise you! They say you only eat free meals! They say you are a free loader!*

The problem in this chapter is that some of the Corinthian believers seem to have been accusing preachers of stealing their Corinthian food and not earning it. Paul points out to them that he has actually made himself into a slave for them (1Cor 8:19-23).

All to God's Glory

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul returns to the theme of idolatry. Remember that Corinth was an immensely important hub for many religions. So he emphasises that Christians must be doing *everything* to the glory of God. He explains, *For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved (1Cor 10:33)*. Of course, there should be no chapter division as we come to Chapter 11 which continues the theme of God's glory.

Paul, says the visitor, they are trying to adopt the same traditions used in the synagogues. They claim that men are more important than women because Adam was made first!

There is a problem. Although Paul praises the believers for following the new traditions (i.e., the communion service as we know it), he then has to address their adherence to temple and synagogue customs which were still creeping back in.

In particular, the ancient and unbiblical tradition of covering of heads in worship is a huge sticking point, because what Paul says is even today misconstrued in all sorts of religions. The only person that God asked to wear a head covering was the High Priest. Our High Priest is Jesus, *not* members of the congregation. The tradition wasn't instigated by Jesus. He gave us one tradition – to share bread and wine recognising His body and blood – and one command – to love one another, presumably without creating a pecking order. That was forced into play in the 2nd century by clergymen. A closer look at Paul's words shows this. Paul writes,

For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels. (1Cor 11:8-10)

In other words, regardless of human traditions regarding the lowly place of women in Greek and Hebrew cultures, Paul states that a woman must have authority over her *own* head – nobody else can control what she does anymore. (He has already said this – remember the widows? Remember also that it wasn't Adam who created Eve, but God). So when a woman is meeting with other Christians they need to recognise *her* authority over *herself*.

Because of Angels

Whether angels were supernatural visitors or simply messengers, they still had to recognise that the woman had equal authority. In Colossians, Paul actually emphasises the *not* being subservient to angels by worshipping them. He says,

Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. (Col 2:18)

If the worldly and then widely-held superstition of head covering for adherents was *still* to be the *norm* in all the Christian congregations, Paul wouldn't even have had to mention it. By saying that men were *not* to cover their heads, he has to remind them that it is God who provides for every human need. Perhaps some had been trying to lord it over women, because Paul states, *For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off (1Cor 11:6)* – presumably to make her look like a man! Paul sums up with this,

A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. (1Cor 11:7)

When Paul says the 'woman *is* the glory of man,' he infers that she reflects God's glory, too. The only glory that any believer *can* have has to come from God, doesn't it? Adam and Eve shared the same DNA, and therefore reflected the same glory, otherwise superiority of the woman over the man is inferred. When Paul says the man is the image and glory of God, he infers that the man has no glory of his own.

Paul never instructs people to worship each other.

‘She is the glory of man’ actually demotes man, as if she has some form of glory inherently that he doesn’t! But Paul wants equality. I think that’s why he states,

...in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God. (1Cor 11:11,12)

This is followed up:

For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice – nor do the churches of God. (1Cor 11:15,16)

Her hair is given to her by God as her covering. Perhaps, knowing the unkindness of human beings, He decided that women needed something nice to remind everyone that they too are blessed by God.

All Glory Comes from God

All glory comes from God. This is backed up in the book of Hebrews where glory or ‘doxa’ is mentioned in this equalising way:

But we do see Jesus... bringing many sons and daughters to glory... Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. (Heb 2:9a,10a,11)

We are *all* made holy by Jesus. He isn’t ashamed of either gender! Now *that* is equality.

Behaviour at Communion

Imagine the messengers from Chloe's household saying, *Paul, it’s awful – some of them get drunk when we are breaking bread! They forget where they are. And, Others bring a feast with them, like when they were worshipping idols in the pagan temples ! It never occurs to them to share, which is sad because some people have so little. As well as, We have tried to change this by sharing what we bring but the greedy ones totally ignore us!*

The unthinkable – happening at their communion services! No wonder Paul goes on to slate the whole Corinthian church for their attitude and behaviour at the breaking of bread. Apparently some had no food, others didn’t share, some got drunk. Paul states the key problems and then offers a solution:

So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions. (1Cor 11:33,34)

Here Paul is condemning the way they were judging each other. He must have been dreading having to sort them out. A good thing that God had given him training as a Pharisee so he could argue back easily.

How To Behave

In chapter 12, Paul writes about conduct in church: *Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed (1Cor 12:1).*

He addresses the *whole* community and advises them to be happy with their individual gifts and not seek their own glory. Hence chapter 13, which is fundamental to every Christian on the planet. *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love (1Cor 13:13).*

It is all about love.

In Chapter 14, the problem for many Christian communities today is the misuse of the following verse:

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. (1Cor 14:34,35)

‘In silence’ should be translated as ‘at peace’. The wording in Greek was used in relation to confrontational questioning – in other words, some women were causing a scene. (Worth mentioning that they had probably consumed a lot of alcohol too!)

Silence is a word that has been seized on by the later church authorities who had by the 4th century AD gone well down the route of using Greek, Roman, and Jewish traditions instead of the loving kindness of Paul. He, after all, had just spent a whole chapter talking about being kind and not confrontational.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. (1Cor 14:39)

Here the *whole* community is encouraged to join in, albeit in an orderly way, without bad temper or quarrelling (1Cor 1:11).

Resurrection or Not

In chapter 15, we can hear the visitors from Chloe's household saying, *Paul, some are saying that we won't be raised from the dead because the resurrection happened when Jesus was risen!*

Paul addresses this problem by saying, *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied (1Cor 15:19).*

Some of the believers in Corinth were very mixed up over the resurrection and when it would take place, or even *if* it would take place. Hence Paul says what he does here:

And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man. I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. (1Cor 15:49,50)

Worth noting that he is addressing men and women equally – otherwise there would be no future for women at all.

All are to be given new bodies. That's why Jesus said there would be no giving in marriage in the kingdom. No longer would the inequalities of size and gender be involved. Hence Paul addresses *everyone* together. He was trying to instill a beautiful, fair, and kind way of living right then and there.

He finishes with a high note:

But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. (1Cor 15:58a)

The Finale

In chapter 16, we can imagine the visitors from Corinth saying, *You know how it's customary for churches to donate money to go to the Jerusalem believers? Well some were saying how do they know that Paul, who obviously has no money of his own, will take the money to Jerusalem and not run off with it?*

This chapter is totally different in that Paul doesn't outline any major problems but subtly resolves what has been reported. First of all, he advises the Corinthians to put money aside so that they don't have to collect in a panic when he arrives. Then he says:

Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me. (1Cor 16:3,4)

In other words – as you don't trust me, *you* will choose couriers to take the letters to Jerusalem, and *I'll* provide letters so that the church people will receive the couriers as believers. If you would prefer me to take the collection on my own – *forget it!* I will agree to go with the couriers but only if you insist I have to. I will *not* be accused of theft.

I love that in the next bit Paul emphasises that a) he is coming to Corinth, and b) he doesn't intend to cut short his visits to Macedonia to accommodate them. *In fact*, he's giving them time to sort out their problems.

Perhaps I will stay with you for a while, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go. For I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. (1Cor 16:6,7)

To be quite frank, if I had been some of the believers in Corinth, I'd have been planning a move before he came! His next paragraph is chilling:

When Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you.... No one, then, should treat him with contempt. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. I am expecting him along with the brothers. (1Cor 16:10,11)

There is *no way* that Timothy should have had cause to be afraid of visiting other Christians! Christians are supposed to be gentle and kind. The fact that he says he will be expecting Timothy to rejoin him, *with the brothers*, is to warn the Corinthians that Paul is keeping tabs on them. He's warning them that there will be witnesses. He mentions 'the brothers' and that seems to connect with a comment nearer the end of the letter:

I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you. (1Cor 16:17)

In verse 17, we have Paul ensuring that Timothy is safeguarded for his visit to Corinth, and back in verse 12 he mentioned Apollos. I suspect it came as a bit of a shock to some in Corinth to

find that Paul and Apollos were both in Ephesus at the same time, when they read this bit of Paul's letter, remembering the friction that had been caused by using Apollos as an example of whose teaching they followed:

Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity. (1Cor 16:12)

Apollos seems to have been in no hurry to have to meet them after their claims and their dreadful behaviour, apparently based on his teaching. He didn't even want to go with bodyguards.

But Paul's next words are more reassuring: *Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love (1Cor 16:13,14).*

It can be no coincidence that when, having given them that advice, he recommends the house of Stephanas as role models: *I urge you, brothers and sisters, to submit to such people and to everyone who joins in the work and labours at it (1Cor 16:15a,16).*

The remainder of the letter turns to the kind of pleasantries that the letters of the New Testament generally include. He passes on greetings from the churches in Asia Minor, and hearty greetings from Aquila and Prisca (sometimes called Priscilla) who had helped Paul establish the church in Corinth.

Then Paul writes in his own handwriting (confirming that he had indeed dictated the letter from notes or from live conversation). But what he writes is in direct contrast to the niceties of the previous verses: *If anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be cursed! Come, Lord! (1Cor 16:22).*

To whom is he referring? As we have seen, it implies that some of the Greek and Jewish Christians in Corinth were more concerned with the doctrines and philosophies of their old religions instead of the command of Jesus to love one another as mentioned in John's Gospel.

He uses a popular Christian slogan used in the first century: 'Maranatha Tha' which means, *Oh, Lord, come!* – a sentiment that we could well use in view of the suffering of people and creatures all over our planet.

He finishes with a blessing: *The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen. (1Cor 16:23,24).*

I always take 'grace' to mean 'goodwill', so Paul is again boosting their faith in Jesus and stating that Jesus only wants what is good for all His believers.

So that concludes my study of this urgent and hard-hitting letter to the Church in Corinth. In this letter, Paul dismissed the foolishness of what Corinthians called wisdom, promoted the protection of the believers, and reminded them of the wonders of God's salvation through the love of our Saviour Jesus.

Like them, we are already living in victory. We are members of the kingdom now. May God bless all believers and fill their hearts with the love and equality worthy of His citizens, through Jesus, and with great thankfulness. Amen.