

Dear Friends,

To write an extensive "Letter" to someone or to a church in New Testament culture was not a simple "Send a letter, text message, or email." There were compelling reasons for each letter, and our study of each New Testament letter should begin with searching to identify the reason--or reasons--for each letter. In most New Testament writings, at least two objectives are readily discoverable, 1) to confront and correct an errant belief or conduct, and 2) to encourage tired, struggling believers to be faithful despite the pressures against them and their faith.

The more carefully we study these letters and learn of the problems those early churches faced, and especially how they were instructed by the Lord through the human authors of each letter to correct them the better we shall be equipped to deal with our own church problems. Forget your personal imagination, "I don't see anything wrong with...." Do you find your idea in Scripture? No? Then, based on inspired Scriptures self-description (2 Timothy 3:16-17 KJV), God finds something wrong with your idea. If not, He would have included your idea on His Book to His people. Rationalizations about for such ideas, but, in the end, wise believers and wise churches should follow what they learn from Scripture and reject anything not taught in Scripture. A favorite unbeliever's (Who claims to be a faithful believer) rationalization of our time is "Since the New Testament contains almost nothing regarding 'X,' we are free to do whatever we wish regarding Question 'X.'" When you hear someone offer this line of bogus reasoning, suggest that they read--better yet, memorize--2 Timothy 3:16-17 and apply those words to every idea or belief they consider. A believing and careful reading of Scripture will uncover abundance of teaching regarding everything that God regards as "...all good works." And the more we faithfully discipline (No accident that "Discipline" is a form of the New Testament word, "Disciple.") our thinking and conduct to New Testament teaching and example the greater our faith and our blessing in our own lives and to others.

Lord help us to respectfully follow Your Word in Scripture,
Joe Holder

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1 Corinthians, The Letter

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name. And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other. For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. (1 Corinthians 1:10-17 KJV 1900)

Each church letter in the New Testament (If not all the New Testament letters or books) was written to address some issue or problem, and to encourage the first recipients to maintain a strong, sound and

healthy faith and faith-life. Our study passage for this week introduces a serious problem in the Corinthian Church.

*Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, **be of one mind**, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you. (2 Corinthians 13:11 KJV; emphasis added)*

Likely Paul wrote 2 Corinthians less than two years after he wrote 1 Corinthians. We might infer by his direct admonition, “**be of one mind**,” that the church had not fully resolved their internal conflicts at that time. The generally accepted time for Paul’s writing 1 Corinthians is around 55-56 AD. The oldest post-New Testament Christian writing is a letter written by Clement of Rome to the Church at Corinth, believed to have been written later in the first century. In Philippians 4:3, Paul mentions a man named Clement who was a fellow laborer with him in the gospel. It is possible that this was the same man who wrote the letter to the Corinthian Church. In that letter, some members of the Corinthian Church voiced unhappiness with the pastor and asked Clement’s counsel. In the letter, Clement rebuked them for creating divisive tension in the church. He referred to the tensions in the church in Paul’s first letter, our study passage, and rebuked them for threatening the harmony of the church over nobodies, not over godly men such as Paul, Peter, or Apollos. Often a church that fosters, or even allows, divisive schism in the church will sow the seeds of those ideas into a growing number of members and thus prolong their ungodly divisive spirit into future generations—if such a church even survives to the next generation. Such ungodly division, privately held or publicly nurtured, is one of the greatest church-killers to mar the history of the Lord’s Church. If we regard Jesus as the true “...**head over all things to the church**,” (Ephesians 1:22 KJV) we will strive to submit our lives, including our personal beliefs, to Him and to each other, not work to promote or to privately foster our own ideas. (Ephesians 5:17-21 KJV)

If the Lord designed His church on earth to be the primary custodian and keeper of His truth, and He did (1 Timothy 3:15; “...**the pillar and ground of the truth**.”), we as individual members of that body are bound by Scripture to seek out the details of our faith **in and from that body** as both that body and we seek those answers from Scripture. Over my years of ministry, I’ve had my share of Joe-ideas about various passages, but in every case, in the end, the prevailing belief of the church agreed with Scripture and nudged me to rethink my Joe-view. Sadly, over that time, I’ve occasionally known sincere believers who thought more highly of their own opinion or of some other person’s or group’s ideas than what they learned in and from the church and its interpretation of Scripture. Their story never ended well, never. How could it when they choose their own ideas and sources over the collected system of truth-preservation the Lord established in the New Testament church?

In addition to a dangerous division of minds in the church (All divisions of mind in a church are dangerous), throughout this letter, Paul deals with numerous issues of belief and/or conduct in the church that failed the pattern which he had taught them during his time with them. (Acts 18) Did he learn of these problems in that same letter from the house of Chloe or from some other source? We only know of this one source, so assuming other sources can only stand on our personal imagination, never an acceptable or wise basis for healthy faith. Six times in 1 Corinthians, Paul introduces a problem with “**Now concerning**” or equivalent expression. Eugene Nida (A Handbook on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians) interprets this phrase specifically as referring to Chloe’s letter and questions reported or raised in it to Paul. If this is correct, not only did the “House of Chloe” report divisiveness to Paul, but they also reported

other significant deviations from his foundational teaching when he first preached to them and set up the church in Corinth.

The number of issues or problems raised by Paul in the letter would suggest that this church had more problems than perhaps any of the churches whose letters from apostles or early leaders in the church make up our New Testament. Possibly the Galatian churches might compete. However, this is not a title that any church should covet.

For the sake of space, I will limit the list of errant beliefs or conduct to those *“Now concerning”* problems, though a cursory read of 1 Corinthians will reveal several other problems as well.

1. ***Schism.*** We read of this problem in our study passage. A church in tension over various personalities or leaders should pay careful attention to these verses. In fact, they should substitute the name of the personalities in their controversy for the names Paul lists but ask themselves each of those questions. *“Was Deacon A crucified for you?” “Were you baptized in the name of Preacher B?”* And the men named in these questions should take a long hard look at their personal contribution to that party spirit (As in a divisive group or *“Party”*). Preachers should avoid using the pulpit to promote their personal cause or ideas. Deacons or other members should equally avoid using the church dining room as their pseudo pulpit to spread their influence that they know to be contradictory to the teachings of their pastor.

2. ***“Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman.”*** (1 Corinthians 7:1 KJV) Given the intense persecution of the time when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, should believers marry and raise a family, or should they remain unmarried and devote themselves wholly to Jesus and their faith family? Paul devotes most of this chapter to that question. Much misguided teaching has occurred from non-contextual interpretation of this chapter and question. While Scripture always contains wise counsel for believers, on occasion, its primary intent was, after all, to address and to correct specific problems in the church to whom the letter was addressed. We do not face the kind of persecution that first century believers faced, so we should not try to hold to every point Paul made in this chapter. However, by all means study and learn from this chapter, as from all of Scripture, the gravity of marriage and God’s teachings that should serve as the foundation for every marriage.

3. ***“Now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful.”*** (1 Corinthians 7:25 KJV) This verse contains fascinating thoughts that reach far beyond the immediate theme of marriage. Paul confesses to no specific commandment from the Lord. Logical extensions of Biblical principles should not be regarded as equally binding as a stated Biblical commandment, but we should strive to live in harmony with all the New Testament’s teachings, not strain to live as near the acceptable edge of ungodliness as possible. What Paul wrote following this verse expands his response in this point. Whatever marriage status a believer occupies, our first assignment from the Lord is to work toward contentment and living in our present situation as fully as possible to the honor and glory of the Lord, not look for escape paths to walk away from Biblical faith-living.

4. ***“Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.”*** (1 Corinthians 8:1 KJV)
As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know

that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. (1 Corinthians 8:4 KJV)

I suppose we could subdivide these verses into two points. Given the similarity of the two, I list them together.

If we interpret Verse 1 as referring to actual participation in a pagan ritual in which a whole animal or some part of it was offered to the idol, New Testament teaching rejects the idea emphatically. No believer can claim imagined superior knowledge as rationalization to participate in error of any degree. "**Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.**" (1 John 5:21 KJV)

In Verse 4, Paul turns to eating meat that was presumably previously offered to a pagan idol. Several commentaries report that pagan priests often would offer the very best cuts of meat to their idol and immediately sell the meat to the local butcher. The butcher would offer the meat for sale with the notation, "Offered to idols," indicating the meat was the best quality available. If this idea was practiced, a logical question arises. If a believer buys and eats this meat, does he participate in idol worship because the meat was formerly offered to an idol? Given the city's reputation, this question might well have become a heated controversy in the Corinthian Church. Paul responds with wise counsel. No, you do not worship the idol by eating this meat. However, Paul uses this question to teach a greater principle that all believers should practice, the impact of what we do on other, sometimes weaker, believers who observe our actions. If a weak believer observes you eating this meat and errantly (Because of their weak conscience) concludes that, since you, a highly respected member of the church, ate this meat, it is wholly acceptable for him to worship Jesus and those idols. So what should you do? "That is his problem, not mine. I'll eat what I want." Or should you regard your brother's or sister's weakness and conduct yourself so as not to leave any question in their mind? How does Paul answer this dilemma? "**Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.**" (1 Corinthians 8:13 KJV)

Read the words of the verse. Don't skip or alter a single word. Paul did not write, "If meat offends my brother." His context deals with me eating meat offered to an idol, setting a bad example, and unwittingly encouraging a weak believer to offend the gospel by actually engaging in the worship of an idol. The problem was not a weak brother becoming offended by Paul's conduct, but their errantly interpreting his conduct and committing personal sin, "to offend." What does Paul say he will do to prevent this catastrophe of the weak brother's or sister's faith? Never eat that meat again. Thank you, Paul. **Regard for your brother and sister in the faith is always to be regarded above personal liberty.** Are we listening to Paul? Will we follow his godly and loving faith example?

5. "**Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant.**" (1 Corinthians 12:1 KJV) Following this "Concerning" introduction, Paul devotes three whole chapters (Chapters 12-14) to the wise and right exercise of spiritual gifts, whatever personal gift we might have. Major principles emphasized include 1) using my gift for the benefit of the whole body, not me personally, 2) using my spiritual gift with gracious love, not harshly or abusively, and 3) above all, use the gift to the edification of the whole church body. This section receives by far the most extensive teaching from Paul in 1 Corinthians. Wise believers will study it long and with much prayer. "Lord, whatever my gift may be, please guide me to use it for the benefit of the whole church body and in selfless love for You **and** for them."

6. "**Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye.**" (1 Corinthians 16:1 KJV) Likely Paul here referred to his collection for the suffering saints in Jerusalem Church, but his teaching should wisely apply to all church finances. How many churches have imploded over sinful squabbles about money, despite such clear and wise teaching in this context? What major principle of giving in/to the church does Paul teach here? "**Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him....**" (1 Corinthians 16:2a KJV) How much we learn from this single verse about godly giving in the church.

1. **Giving is the responsibility of every member,** not just a few. "...**let every one of you....**"

2. ***Our giving should be regular***, not random or occasional. ***“Upon the first day of the week...”*** If we, like possibly many of the Corinthians, were quite poor and lived hand-to-mouth, ***“the first day of the week”*** puts our giving to the church as our top priority in our regular budget.

3. And finally, ***“as God hath prospered him.”*** Paul urges the Corinthians to regard whatever financial assets they have as originating with the Lord who “Prosper” us. This mindset frames our giving. We are giving back to God some of what He gave to us. ***It should nudge greater liberality in our giving.*** If the Lord prospers us financially, giving some of what we have back to Him should please Him.

We’ve studied six of the major issues that Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians. A careful study will identify a total of around fifteen issues which he confronted and sought to correct, ranging from inexcusable moral sin in the church (And pride in the members that they were so broad minded about as to tolerate it—Chapter 5) to denial by some of the members of a literal bodily resurrection. (Chapter 15) Over the years my wife has observed that I likely preach more sermons from 1 Corinthians than any other book in the New Testament. For good reason. I preach to broken struggling humans, just as Paul preached and wrote to broken struggling humans. First century or twenty first century, believers need to be reminded—sometimes confronted—with our failures in the faith and nudged back to the fully furnished New Testament way of faith and conduct.

First Corinthians has a wealth of wise truth to teach us. Will we learn its invaluable lessons? Or will we repeat the failures of the Corinthian Church?

Elder Joe Holder