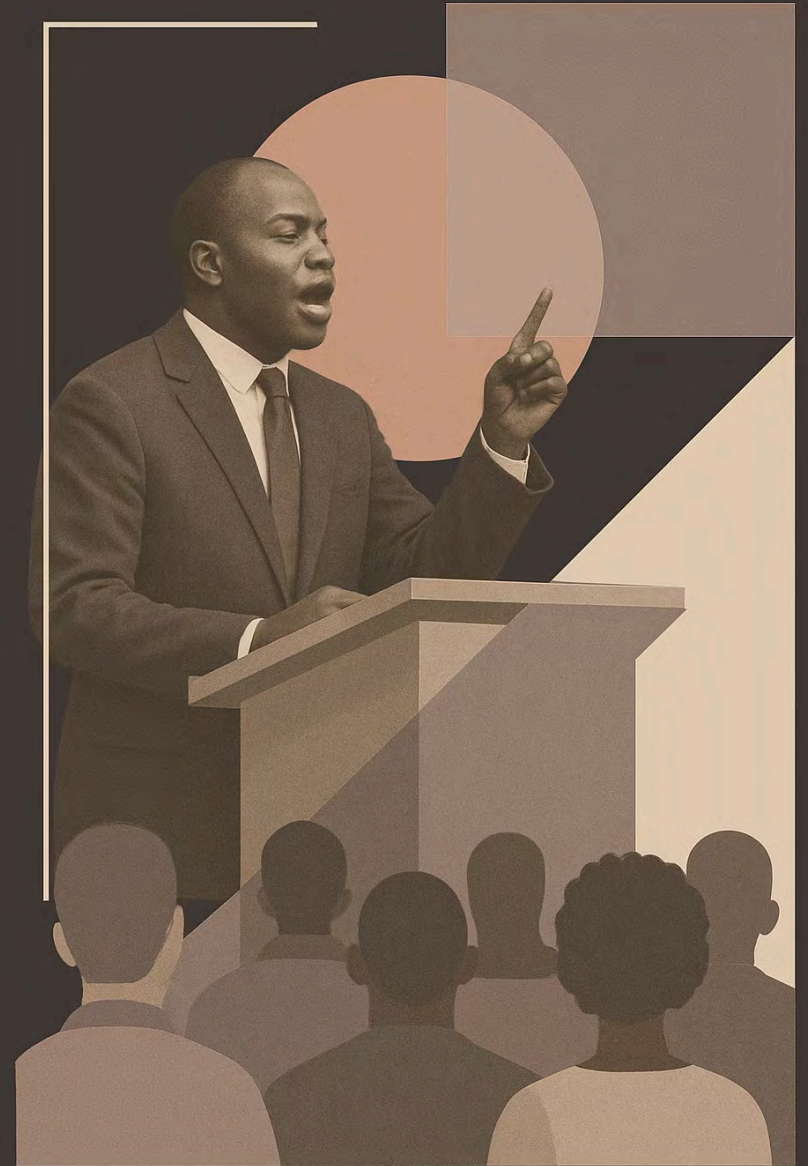


# Bible Study: 1 Corinthians

## *Order, Power, and the Cross-Shaped Community*

A deep dive into one of Paul's most urgent, practical, and challenging letters to the early church.



## 1 Corinthians (NRSVUE)

# A Church Gifted, Divided, and Being Reformed

Paul writes not to a perfect congregation, but to a real one. A church with extraordinary gifts and serious problems. Sound familiar? This letter is as relevant today as it was in the first century.



# The Big Idea

Paul is writing to a church that has everything going for it and is still falling apart. He is calling them back to something deeper than spiritual talent or social status.

## Spiritually Gifted

They spoke in tongues, prophesied, and demonstrated the power of the Spirit.

## Socially Divided

Status, personality, and preference had fractured their fellowship into competing camps.

## Morally Confused

Serious ethical failures were being tolerated, even celebrated, in the congregation.

Paul's remedy is not a rulebook. It is a return to the **cross-shaped life**, lived together, in love and accountability.

# Why This Book Matters

This is not theory. This is a **messy church letter**, written to real people dealing with real problems. If you have ever sat in a congregation that frustrated you, challenged you, or let you down, you already know what Paul was writing into.

## → Church Conflict

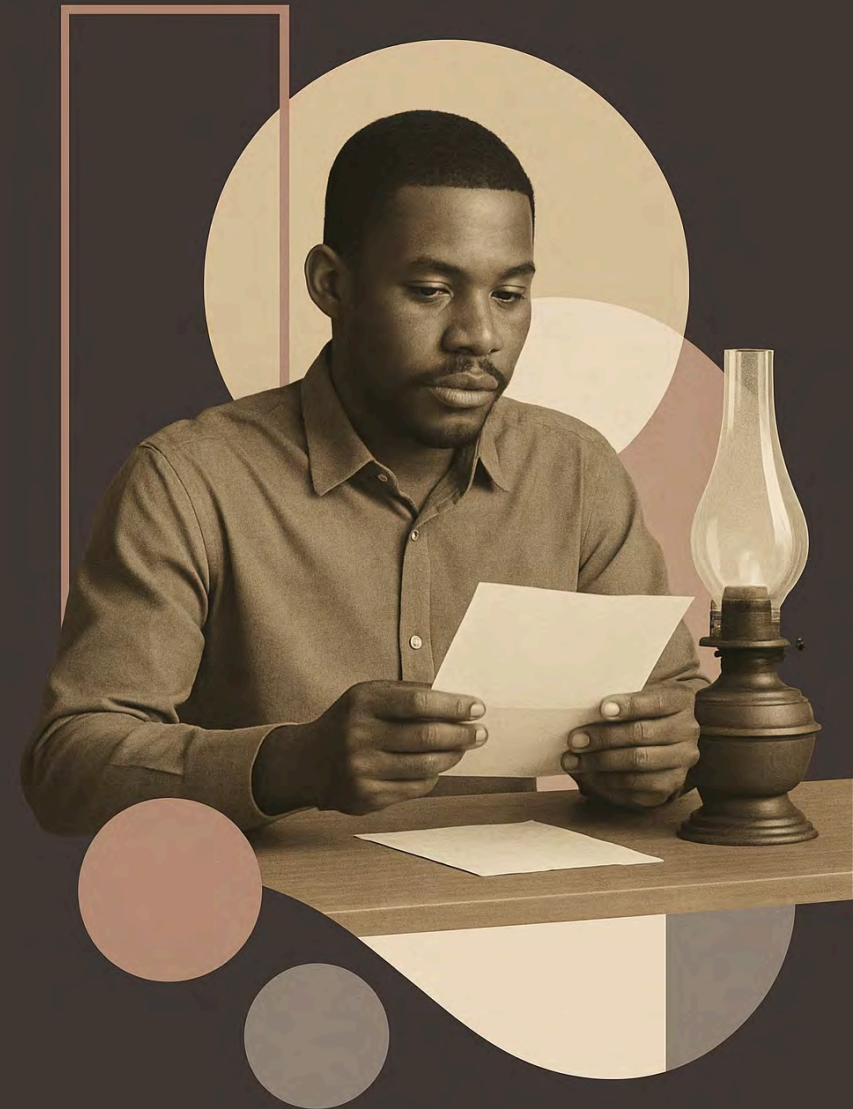
Members were picking sides, forming cliques, and competing for spiritual prestige.

## → Ego Clashes

Strong personalities were pulling the church apart rather than holding it together.

## → Worship Gone Wrong

Sacred gatherings had become scenes of disorder, inequality, and self-expression rather than communal praise.



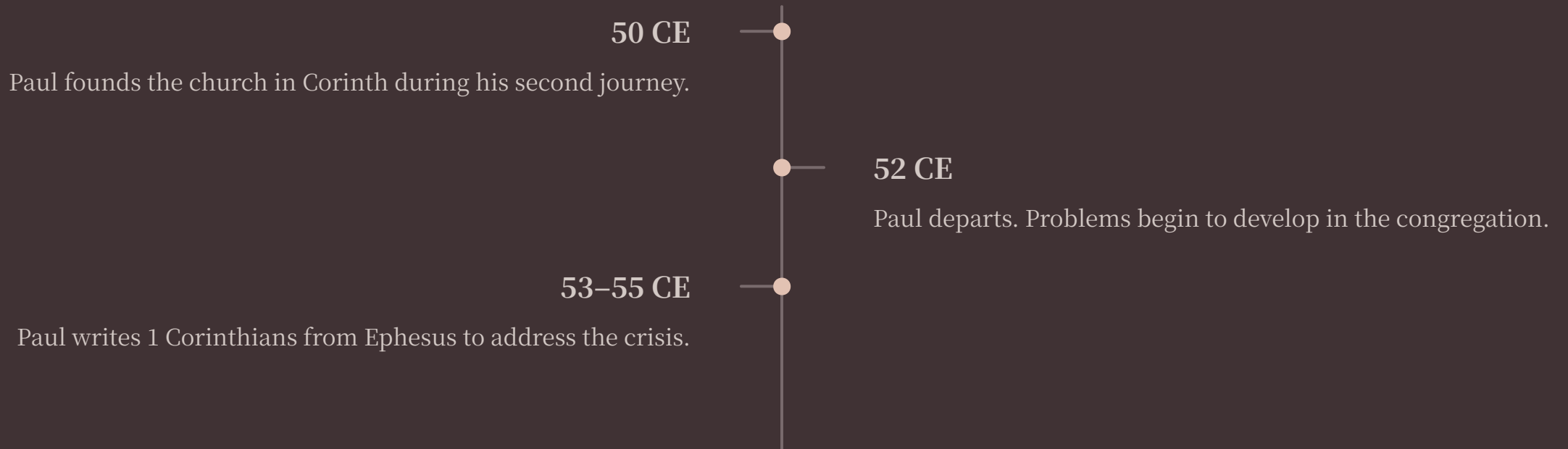
# Historical Background

## When and Where

Paul writes around 53 to 55 CE from the city of **Ephesus**, during his third missionary journey. He had spent roughly eighteen months in Corinth establishing this church, as recorded in Acts 18.

## The Founding

Paul arrived in Corinth around 50 CE, preached in the synagogue, and eventually moved his ministry to the home of Titius Justus. Many Corinthians heard and believed. Aquila and Priscilla were key partners in this work. Paul left the church in the hands of local leaders and stayed connected through letters and messengers.



# The City of Corinth

To understand the letter, you have to understand the city. Corinth was not a quiet, simple town. It was a cosmopolitan hub of commerce, culture, and corruption, one of the most important cities in the Roman world.



## Wealthy

A major trade port connecting east and west. Money flowed freely and status followed it.



## Diverse

Greeks, Romans, Jews, and travelers from across the empire all called Corinth home.



## Status-Obsessed

Social hierarchy shaped everything, from who you ate with to who got to speak publicly.



## Sexually Permissive

The culture normalized behaviors that directly conflicted with the ethic Paul was teaching.

⚠ Think of Corinth as a city where power, money, and influence ran everything. Sound familiar?



# The Problem Paul Is Addressing

Paul does not write this letter in a vacuum. He has received multiple reports about the Corinthian church, and the picture is not pretty. He hears from different sources, each confirming that something has gone seriously wrong.

## Paul's Sources

### Chloe's People

Members of Chloe's household bring Paul firsthand reports of division and strife within the congregation.

### Church Leaders

Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus visit Paul and fill in the details about what is happening on the ground.

### Their Own Letter

The Corinthians themselves write to Paul with questions, which he addresses beginning in chapter 7.

## The Church's Struggles

- Deep **division** along social and personality lines
- Serious **sexual ethics** failures being ignored
- **Worship chaos** at the Lord's Supper and in congregational gatherings
- **Spiritual confusion** about gifts, resurrection, and freedom

# What does it mean to be the church in a culture that shapes you more than you shape it?

This is Paul's core question to the Corinthians, and it is our question too. Every generation of believers must wrestle with where the culture ends and the community of Christ begins.



# Structure of the Book

Paul organizes his letter around two major concerns: what he has *heard* about the church and what they have *asked* him. The phrase "now concerning" in the Greek marks each new topic in the second section and serves as a helpful guide for readers.

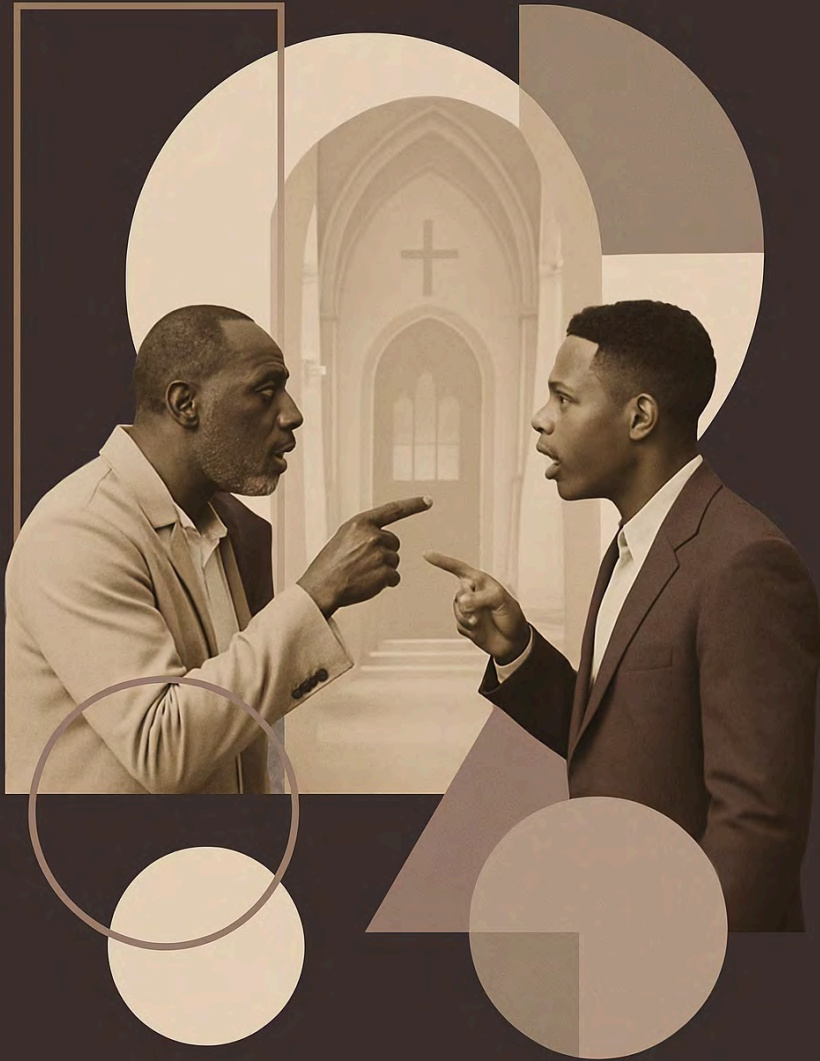
## Part One — Chapters 1 through 6

Problems Paul *heard about* from reports. Division, sexual immorality, and lawsuits between believers. These are issues the church did not bring to Paul. Others told him.

## Part Two — Chapters 7 through 16

Questions they *asked* in their letter. Marriage, food sacrificed to idols, spiritual gifts, the resurrection, and the collection for Jerusalem. These are the issues they wanted Paul's guidance on.

- ① "Now concerning..." (Greek: *peri de*) appears throughout chapters 7 to 16 and signals each new question Paul is answering from their letter.



# Divisions in the Church — Chapters 1 through 4

The very first problem Paul tackles is factionalism. The Corinthians have divided themselves according to which teacher or leader they prefer, and they are using those loyalties as a way to rank themselves above each other.

"I belong to Paul." "I belong to Apollos." "I belong to Cephas." "I belong to Christ." — 1 Corinthians 1:12 (NRSVUE)

Paul's response is sharp: Christ is not divided. No human teacher died for you. No one baptized you into their own name. The church's unity is rooted in Christ alone, not in the charisma or credentials of any preacher. The divisions reveal that the church has confused celebrity with calling.

# The Cross Versus the Ego

Paul cuts to the heart of the matter. The Corinthians are operating by the world's logic, where status, wisdom, and power determine worth. But the cross completely overturns that system.

## The World's Logic

- Power wins respect
- Wisdom earns status
- Strength gets results
- Prestige determines voice

## The Cross's Logic

- God uses the weak to shame the strong
- God uses the foolish to shame the wise
- God uses the overlooked to disrupt hierarchy
- Humility and transformation are the marks of power

📖 "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." — 1 Corinthians 1:27 (NRSVUE)

# Sexual Ethics and Discipline — Chapters 5 and 6

Paul now turns to some of the most uncomfortable issues in the letter. The church is not just tolerating moral failure. In some cases, they are boasting about their tolerance as if it signals spiritual maturity.

1

## Incest

A man is in a sexual relationship with his father's wife. The congregation has done nothing about it. Paul is shocked at their inaction and calls for immediate discipline.

2

## Lawsuits Between Believers

Members are taking each other to civil courts rather than resolving conflicts within the community. Paul sees this as a public failure of Christian witness.

3

## Sexual Immorality

Some members are visiting prostitutes and justifying it through a misapplication of Christian freedom. Paul corrects this sharply.

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" — 1 Corinthians 6:19 (NRSVUE)

# Marriage and Singleness — Chapter 7

Now Paul shifts to answering the Corinthians' own questions. They have asked about marriage and sexual relationships, and scholars believe some in the church were teaching that celibacy was spiritually superior to marriage. Paul pushes back carefully.



## Marriage

Paul affirms marriage as honorable. Spouses have mutual obligations to each other and should not withhold from one another except by mutual agreement for prayer.



## Divorce

Paul urges believers not to separate, but acknowledges that if a non-believing spouse chooses to leave, the believer is not bound. Peace matters.



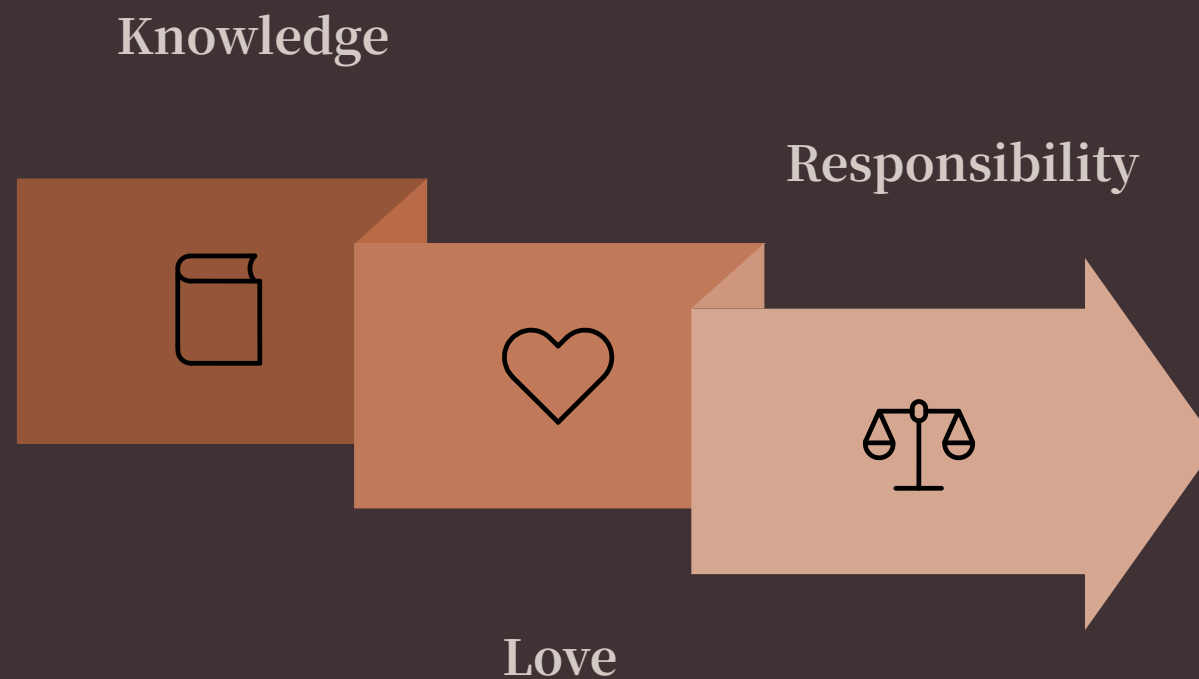
## Singleness

Paul speaks from his own experience: singleness allows undivided devotion to God, especially given what he calls "the present crisis," likely referring to anticipated persecution or the nearness of Christ's return.

ⓘ This is not a timeless rulebook for all people. It is pastoral guidance for a specific community in a specific moment of crisis. Context matters enormously.

# Freedom Versus Responsibility — Chapters 8 through 10

The presenting issue is food sacrificed to idols, a very practical first-century problem. When meat was offered at a pagan temple, it was often sold in the marketplace afterward. Some believers said eating it was fine, because idols are not real. Others were deeply troubled by the practice. Who was right?



Paul essentially agrees with the "strong" believers on theology, but he sides with the "weak" on practice. Knowledge without love inflates the ego. Love builds up the body. The spiritually mature person uses freedom to protect the vulnerable, not to prove a point.

# The Real Principle — Love Limits Freedom

## Love limits freedom.

Not everything you are permitted to do is something you should do. This is Paul's governing principle across chapters 8 through 10. Freedom is real. But in the body of Christ, freedom is always exercised in relationship, and relationship requires consideration of others.

"All things are lawful,' but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful,' but not all things build up." — 1 Corinthians 10:23 (NRSVUE)

The question is never just: Can I do this? The question is: Will this help, harm, or hinder someone else in the family of God?



# Worship Problems Begin — Chapter 11

Paul now addresses the Corinthians' gathered worship life, and what he finds is troubling. The very rituals meant to unite the body are being used to reinforce social hierarchies.

## Head Coverings

Paul addresses the practice of head coverings in worship. Scholars debate the exact cultural context, but Paul's concern is clear: worship should honor both God and the dignity of every person present. The way believers present themselves in worship carries communal meaning.

## Lord's Supper Abuse

This is where Paul is most direct and most alarmed. Wealthier members are arriving early, eating the full meal, and drinking freely. Poorer members arrive later from their jobs to find little or nothing left. The sacred meal has become a class display. Paul says: this is not the Lord's Supper.

- ⊗ When the worship table becomes a place of shame rather than belonging, something essential has been lost. Paul names this plainly.

# The Lord's Supper — Chapter 11

## You cannot honor Christ while dishonoring people.

Paul's concern about the Lord's Supper is not ceremonial. It is about justice. The early church celebrated communion as a full meal shared together, and in Corinth it had become a moment of social sorting rather than sacred solidarity.

"For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves." — 1 Corinthians 11:29 (NRSVUE)

To "discern the body" means to recognize Christ in the gathered community, including the poor, the late-arriving laborer, and the marginalized member. The table is not just a ritual. It is a declaration of whose we are and how we treat each other.





# Who Gets to Speak in Worship?

## TRANSITION

As Paul moves deeper into the life of gathered worship, a critical and sometimes contested question emerges. It is a question that many churches are still wrestling with today.

# Who has a voice?

In a community shaped by the cross, who gets to speak, prophesy, pray, and lead? Paul's answer is more complex and more liberating than many assume. The next several slides unpack what the text actually says.

# Women in Worship — 1 Corinthians 11

Before we get to the famous "silence" passage, we must first read what Paul says earlier in the same letter. In chapter 11, Paul gives instructions for how women should cover their heads when they do something very specific in worship.

## Praying Publicly

Paul assumes women are leading prayer in the gathered assembly. He does not prohibit it. He gives instructions for how to do it with appropriate cultural honor.

## Prophecy

Prophecy in the early church was one of the highest gifts, speaking a word from God to the community for edification, encouragement, and consolation. Women are doing this, out loud, in the assembly.

## Participating Actively

Women are not passive observers in Corinthian worship. They are fully present and fully engaged as speakers and contributors to the communal gathering.

- ✔ In chapter 11, women are not silent. They are active, vocal participants in early Christian worship. This is the baseline Paul establishes.

# The Tension — 1 Corinthians 14

Later in the same letter, Paul writes words that seem to directly contradict what he said in chapter 11. This is one of the most debated passages in all of the New Testament, and we need to sit with the tension honestly rather than pretend it is not there.

## Chapter 11 — Women Are Speaking

Paul gives instructions for women who pray and prophesy in worship. He assumes and accepts their vocal participation. No prohibition is given.

## Chapter 14 — "Let Women Be Silent"

"Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate." — 1 Corinthians 14:34 (NRSVUE)

So which is it? Speaking in chapter 11 and silent in chapter 14? A serious interpreter cannot simply ignore one passage or the other. Both are in the same letter. Both matter. We need the full context to understand what Paul is actually doing.

⚠ Some scholars note that 14:34–35 may be a marginal note inserted by a later copyist, since it appears in different locations in ancient manuscripts. This is a live scholarly debate.

# Expanding the Lens — Women Leaders in the Early Church

To understand Paul's letters rightly, we cannot read them in isolation. When we look at the broader witness of the New Testament, a clear pattern emerges: women were not marginal in the early church. They were central.



## Priscilla

Alongside her husband Aquila, Priscilla pulls Apollos aside and explains the way of God to him "more accurately." She is a teacher of teachers. (Acts 18:26)



## Phoebe

Paul calls her a *diakonos* (deacon) and a *prostatis* (leader or benefactor) of the church at Cenchreae. She likely carried the letter to the Romans. (Romans 16:1–2)



## Junia

Paul calls her "prominent among the apostles." She is named alongside Andronicus as someone who was in Christ before Paul and suffered imprisonment for the gospel. (Romans 16:7)

The evidence is clear: women served as deacons, apostles, and teachers in the earliest Christian communities. Any interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14 must account for this reality.

# What Is Paul Actually Doing in Chapter 14?

Rather than reading Paul as issuing a timeless ban on women's voices, careful interpreters consider what was happening in Corinth specifically. The context of chapter 14 is chaotic, unordered worship, where multiple people are speaking at once and no one can understand what is being said. Paul is calling for order, not silencing.

## Addressing Disorder, Not Gender

Paul's entire concern in chapter 14 is edification and orderly worship. The instructions about silence apply to tongue-speakers and prophets as well. Everyone, at some point, is told to be quiet so others can speak.

## Responding to a Specific Disruption

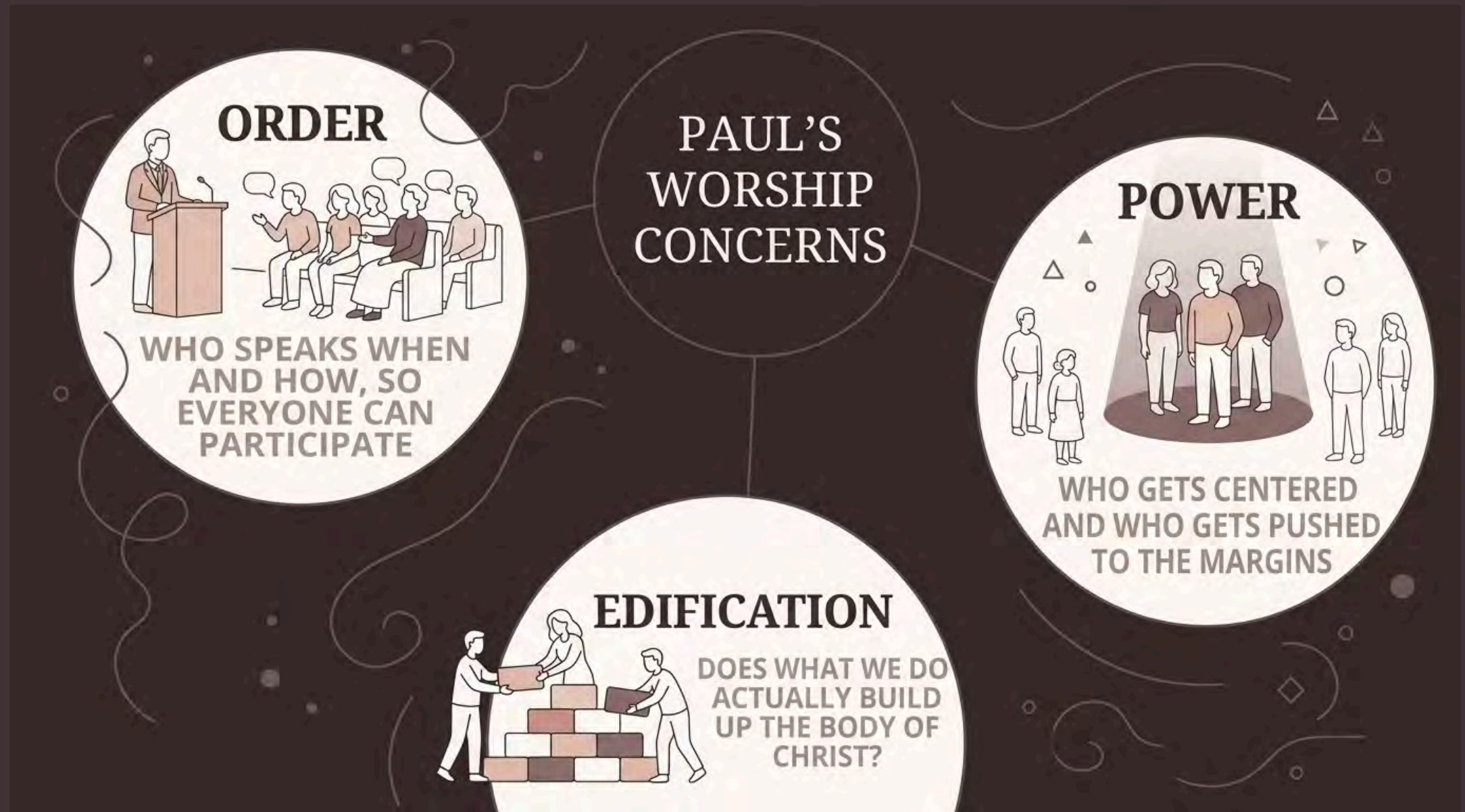
Some scholars believe certain women were interrupting prophetic speech to ask questions in a way that was culturally disruptive. Paul may be addressing that specific behavior, not creating a universal rule.

## Correcting Chaos, Not Calling Silence Forever

The instruction fits a pattern: Paul consistently asks any group causing disorder to yield for the sake of the whole. He applies that same principle here.

# The Real Issue — Order, Power, and Edification

Pull back from the specific debates and the underlying issue becomes clear. Paul is not ultimately writing about gender. He is writing about what it means for a community to be built up rather than broken down by its own gatherings.



- Paul's governing question throughout chapters 12 through 14 is this: Does what we do in worship actually build up the body? If not, something needs to change, regardless of how talented or gifted the person doing it may be.

# Spiritual Gifts — Chapters 12 through 14

Paul spends three full chapters on spiritual gifts because the Corinthians have turned them into a competition. Specifically, speaking in tongues has become the status symbol of spiritual achievement. Paul dismantles this entire framework.

## Many Gifts, One Body

Paul lists a wide variety of gifts: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues, and interpretation. None of these gifts makes the person who holds it superior. They are all expressions of the same Spirit, given for the benefit of the whole community.

"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." — 1 Corinthians 12:7 (NRSVUE)

## The Body Metaphor

Paul uses the human body as his central image. Every part is necessary. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you." The parts that seem weaker are often indispensable. When one part suffers, all suffer. When one part is honored, all rejoice. This is the logic of the body of Christ.

- ① No gift makes you superior. Every gift is given to serve, not to impress. The measure of spiritual maturity is not how dramatically you are gifted. It is how lovingly you use what you have been given.

# The Greatest Gift — Chapter 13

## Without love, your gift means nothing.

Placed right between chapters 12 and 14, the love chapter is not a wedding reading. It is a corrective, inserted directly into the middle of Paul's argument about spiritual gifts. He is saying: without this, all of your gifts are just noise.

### Love Is Patient and Kind

Love does not rush past the struggling or the slow. It stays. It extends itself with warmth and without resentment.

### Love Is Not Arrogant or Boastful

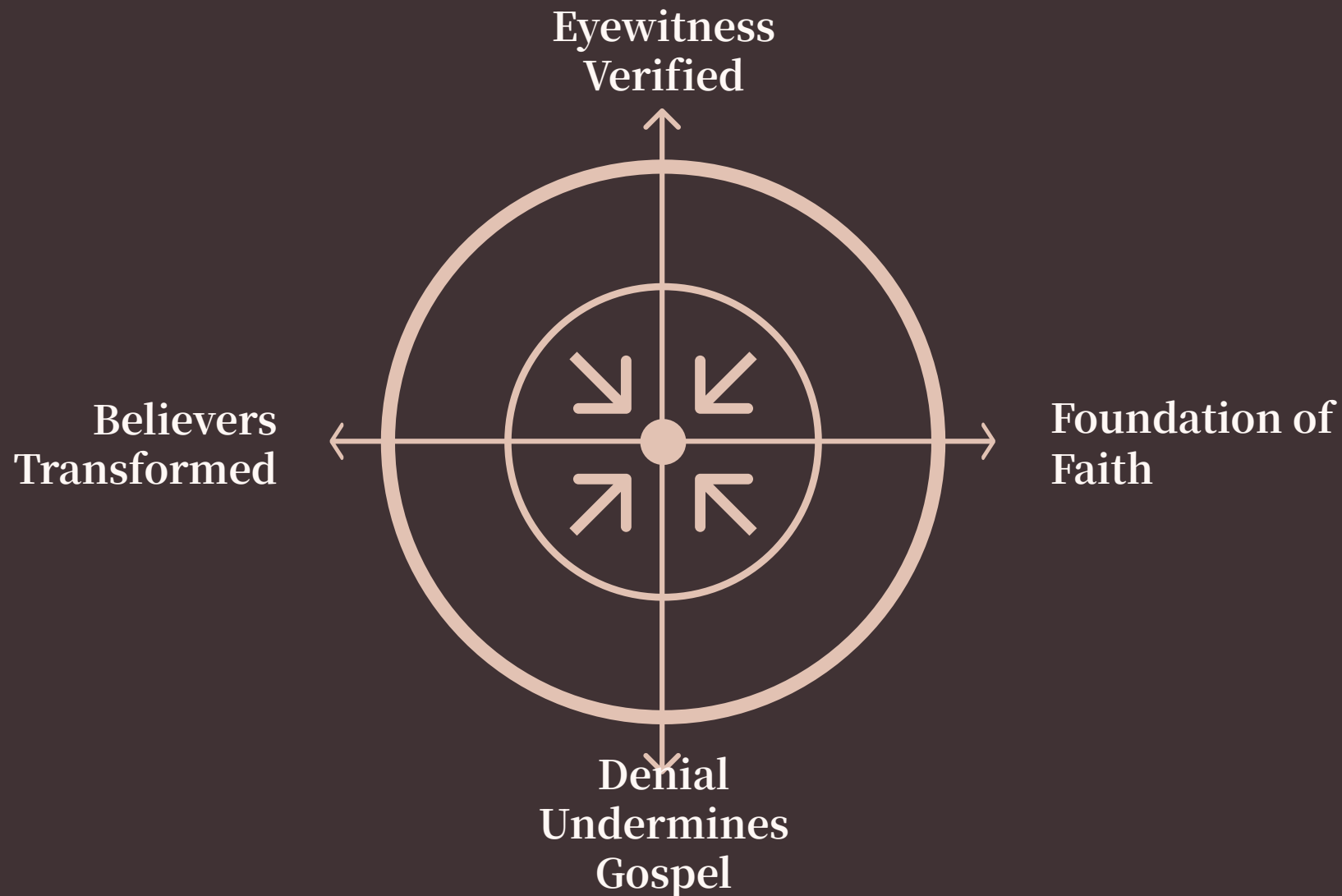
Love does not use its gifts to build its own reputation. It does not need to be seen or celebrated to show up.

### Love Never Ends

Tongues will cease. Prophecy will pass away. Knowledge will fade. But love, Paul says, outlasts every gift because love is the nature of God expressed through us.

# The Resurrection — Chapter 15

Paul closes with what he calls "the gospel." Some in the Corinthian church had begun to deny a future bodily resurrection, perhaps influenced by Greek philosophy, which often viewed the body as a prison the soul should escape from. Paul responds with the longest, most sustained theological argument in the letter.



"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." — 1 Corinthians 15:17 (NRSVUE)

The resurrection is not optional theology. It is the load-bearing wall of the entire Christian structure. Remove it and everything else collapses. Paul insists: Christ is risen, and because Christ is risen, we too will be raised.

# Final Thought — The Gifted, Divided Church

Before we close, Paul holds up a mirror. The Corinthian church was not a failed church. It was a vibrant, active, passionate community. And yet that same community was causing real harm. This is the warning that makes 1 Corinthians permanently relevant.

## A Church Can Be...

- **Gifted** — full of Spirit-empowered people
- **Active** — busy with programs, gatherings, and ministry
- **Passionate** — deeply committed in feeling and expression

## And Still Be...

- **Divided** — fracturing along lines of ego, preference, and status
- **Harmful** — hurting people it claims to love and serve
- **Out of Order** — unable to be the community God is calling it to become

⚠ Gifts without love are just noise. Activity without accountability is just busyness. Passion without humility can become the very thing that tears a church apart.

# Reflection Questions for Group Discussion

These questions are meant to move us from the text to our lives, from Corinth to our own congregation. Take your time. Be honest. Let the letter examine you.

1

## Gifted or Dividing?

Where do you see yourself in the Corinthian church? Are you gifted and contributing to division, or gifted and helping to build unity?

2

## Freedom That Harms

Have you ever used your freedom, your opinion, or even your "rightness" in a way that harmed someone else in the body? What would it look like to lead with love instead?

3

## Who Is Being Overlooked?

Who might be getting overlooked, silenced, or undervalued in our church? What responsibility do we have to make space for their voice?

4

## Love as the Standard

If love is the standard Paul gives us, not talent, not position, not knowledge, how would that change the way we show up in worship, meetings, and relationships?

## Paul's Letter to Bethel

If Paul wrote a letter to our church today, what do you think he would affirm? And what do you think he would challenge us to change immediately?

## Examined or Examining?

Are we willing to let the text examine us, or are we just examining the text? There is a difference, and the Spirit knows which one we are doing.

## In Practice, Not Intention

What kind of church are we actually becoming? Not in intention, but in practice. Not in mission statements, but in how we treat each other on a Tuesday.

# Closing Reflection

## God is forming a community.

Not just individuals. Not just good people with strong beliefs. A **community**, shaped together, over time, through struggle and grace and accountability and love.

### The Cross

A community that has surrendered the ego-driven pursuit of status and prestige, choosing instead the humble, self-giving way of Christ.

### Love

A community where the greatest gift is not the most dramatic one, but the one exercised most faithfully in service of others.

### Justice

A community where the Lord's Table is truly open, where no one is shamed, overlooked, or made to feel they arrived too late to belong.

### Order

A community where every voice is valued, every gift is deployed for the common good, and worship builds up rather than breaks down.

"Let all that you do be done in love." — 1 Corinthians 16:14 (NRSVUE)