



1 Corinthians 7:1. “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote...” Here is what the original letter to Paul could have been like:

Dear Paul,

I hope that this letter finds you well and I pray that you are enjoying the favor of our God each and every day. However, I don't have much time, so I hope you won't mind me getting straight to the reason for my writing to you.

A lot of things have happened since you left and went to Ephesus and, quite honestly, we're not exactly sure how to deal with some of the problems that we are experiencing.

Marriage.

First of all, a number of our marriages are struggling quite a bit. In those marriages where both spouses are Christians, some of our men have continued to embrace the pagan idea that our bodies are evil things and that truly “spiritual” people will abstain from the usual privileges of marriage. Their women don't seem to agree and this is causing quite a bit of tension in the home. One couple has recently separated over the issue. They aren't divorced yet, but it seems that they might be heading in that direction and that a few others might want to follow suit. Do you have any wisdom from the Lord for these couples?

We also have marriages where only one spouse is a Christian. Is the believing spouse free to divorce the unbelieving spouse and to remarry within the church? And what about our widows? Are they free to remarry? What about our engaged couples? Should they complete their vows at this time? And what about our unmarried people? Should we advise them to marry? I fear that some of them may fall into sin if they remain unmarried for too long. After all, you'll remember that our young people aren't exactly known for their self-control.

Food sacrificed to idols.

Anyway...moving on. As Christians, how much freedom do we have in social settings? Are we allowed to eat food that has been sacrificed to one of our former gods? Our unbelieving friends invite us over for dinner from time to time and set before us meat that has been offered in sacrifice. Some of us have eaten the meat, but others of us refuse to do so, believing it to be a sin. And still, there are others: they refuse at first, but when they see some of the leading men eating, they assume it must be okay. What should we do?

Gender issues in our gatherings.

And I didn't think that this was a big deal, but apparently some people do. Some of our women have refused to cover their heads during our times of prayer. Is that a problem?

And now, knowing you Paul, I imagine that these last three problems will be extremely troubling.

The Lord's Supper.

When we gather for our community meals after the service, the wealthy members bring only enough food and drink for their own families. Some of our poor are completely left to fend for themselves and, on occasion, many of them have left hungry. It's a far cry from the “Lord's Supper” that we enjoyed together when you were here.

Spiritual manifestations.

As if this were not bad enough, our services themselves have grown increasingly chaotic. We have all sorts of “spiritual manifestations” going on. Every week, we have people shouting out loud in some unknown tongue, sometimes all at once. When I ask some of them about it afterward, one speaks about this spirit being the source of his manifestation and another speaks about that spirit. I can hardly tell the difference at times between our Christian gatherings and the sort of thing that we used to experience in our pagan temples. But not everyone is bothered by this. Some quite enjoy it, and so many seem eager

to speak in tongues in the assembly.

I think It's actually starting to divide the church. And personally, I find it embarrassing when I invite my unbelieving friends to church and the usual suspects carry on with their antics. One of my friends actually walked right out in the middle of the service one week. He didn't even get a chance to hear the sermon about Jesus.

What do you think Paul? Should we forbid this business of tongues in the assembly? I'm open to the idea that some of it may be genuine, but so much of it seems contrived or manufactured. How can we tell the difference?

The resurrection of the dead.

And finally Paul, some of us are starting to say that there is no such thing as a literal resurrection from the dead. But for some reason, I seem to remember you making a big deal out of that when you were here. There will be a resurrection...right?

The Collection and Paul's next visit.

Thanks Paul...oh yeah...two more things...How do we take up our collection for the saints in need, and when will we get to see you, Timothy and Apollos again?

That's all for now Paul. We can't wait to see you again on this side of the Sea. In the meantime, may the wisdom of the gods--sorry man; old habits die hard--may the God of all wisdom and grace be with you always.

*Your friends,
Crispus and Gaius*

Paul's response is 1 Corinthians...

Outline.

Today marks the beginning of our new 4-week series entitled The Spirit and His Gifts, and with the rest of our time today, all I want to do is to lay the foundation for the next three weeks. In order to do that, I want us to take a look at three things today:

1. The Conclusion to Paul's remarks on the Spirit and His Gifts (14:39-40)
2. The Context for Paul's remarks on the Spirit and His Gifts (1:10-13; 15:1-4)
3. The Opening to Paul's remarks on the Spirit and His Gifts (12:1-3)

THE CONCLUSION.

1 Corinthians 14:39-40

So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But all things should be done decently and in order.

From these two little verses, we learn some very important things that we will need to keep in mind as we go through the rest of our series:

- Whatever Paul means by *prophesy* throughout these chapters, it's a good thing! (notice how he says "earnestly desire to prophesy...")
- Whatever Paul means by *speaking in tongues* throughout these chapters, that too is a good thing! (notice how he commands them not to forbid it)

How do these statements challenge you? Which camp have you put yourself in?

THE CONTEXT.

1Corinthians 1:10-12

"I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment."

"For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos, or 'I follow Cephas,' or 'I follow Christ.'"

There was unnecessary division in the Corinthian church...over lots of things--including their lack of agreement concerning how the Holy Spirit shows himself through Christians in their public gatherings. So, beginning with their silly arguments over which of them belonged to the elite group of Christians in Corinth by virtue of which pastor had baptized them, Paul took the information in their verbal reports and in their letter and began to address all of the things that were unnecessarily dividing the church.

How have you succumbed to perceiving a pastor, teacher, or musician with celebrity status? What was your motivation? Insecurity? Fear? Wanting to boast in your identification with a certain type of Christianity?

Aren't we still divided into groups on the basis of our different understandings of the Holy Spirit and his gifts? How about other non-essential, secondary, open-handed issues? Have even your correctness over essential and closed hand issues made you feel superior? How do you do damage to the gospel when you separate yourselves to make yourself feel better about yourself?

What was causing the unnecessary division at Corinth?

It's often easy to identify the surface-level problems affecting a church or a family, but these are usually just symptoms of the real problem. That was certainly the case in Corinth. There was a bigger problem lurking beneath the surface, causing all of the division described in this letter.

1 Corinthians 1:13

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized into the name of Paul?

You see this even more clearly in chapter 15, right after Paul's concluding remarks on the Spirit and His Gifts, where he says:

1 Corinthians 15:1-4

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...

How does a church get to be like the church in Corinth? The real problem at Corinth is the real problem in our churches today. The Corinthians had taken their eyes off of Jesus and what he had done to forgive their sins and to make them all a part of God's one family on the earth. Something else had taken the place of first importance in their church.

How does the gospel adjust your thinking from the situations you described in response to the questions above? If the gospel is the power of God, what does it say about the apparent power of a personality or an individual's gift?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Have you confessed from your heart that Jesus is Lord? Is this confession evident in the way that you live?
- In your opinion, what things tend to displace Christ and the gospel as the things of "first importance" in our churches?
- When you look for evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence, what do you tend to look for?