

THE STRUCTURE AND THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE OF 1 CORINTHIANS

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It may be more challenging to discern the structure and theological message of 1 Corinthians than any other New Testament book. I recently surveyed about two hundred commentaries and articles on 1 Corinthians, and relatively few of them agree on either the letter's precise structure or its theological message. A 2016 essay that focuses on scholarship in the last three decades concurs: "There is presently no consensus on the logic of the arrangement of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, or on the related question of a central theme."¹ This essay proposes a simple and unusual structure for the letter (§2) and then attempts to articulate its theological message (§3). But first it qualifies what I presuppose about the letter (§1).

1. FIVE PRESUPPOSITIONS ABOUT 1 CORINTHIANS

Before proposing what the structure and theological message of 1 Corinthians are, I should concisely clarify some relevant features I presuppose about the letter. I will assert these five presuppositions without arguing for them.

1. First Corinthians—like the rest of the Bible—is God-breathed, entirely true, and our final authority.² It does not contradict itself or the rest of the Bible.
2. In addition to 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul wrote at least two other letters to the church in Corinth. He wrote those four letters in this order: (a) a letter *before* 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:9);

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¹ Matthew R. Malcolm, "The Structure and Theme of First Corinthians in Recent Scholarship," *CurBR* 14 (2016): 256.

² See D. A. Carson, ed., *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016). For a more accessible approach, see Andrew David Naselli, "Scripture: How the Bible Is a Book Like No Other," in *Don't Call It a Comeback: The Same Faith for a New Day*, ed. Kevin DeYoung (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 59–69.

- (b) 1 Corinthians; (c) what some call the “tearful letter” or “severe letter” (2:4; 7:8), which he wrote after a “painful visit” (2 Cor. 2:1) to Corinth that did not go well;³ and (d) 2 Corinthians.⁴
3. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:1) “to the church of God that is in Corinth” (1:2) from Ephesus (16:8), probably near the end of his ministry there early in AD 55 (cf. 16:5–9 with Acts 19:21–22).
 4. In 1 Corinthians, Paul responds to reports that Chloe’s people gave him about the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11) and to a letter that the church wrote him (7:1a). The most basic purpose of his letter is to exhort the Corinthian church to live as what they are—“saints” or God’s holy people (1:2). The sins Paul corrects were common in Corinth, which in the middle of the first century “was at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world.”⁵ Corinth valued impressive public speakers, status, greed, immoral sex, personal rights, and idolatry. The Corinthian church had grown up in that pagan context and its members had only recently become Christians, so it is not surprising that the church was still embracing Corinth’s worldly values to some degree.
 5. First Corinthians is a letter like other ancient Greco-Roman letters. Paul’s letter matches the customary three-part form: (1) introduction, (2) body, and (3) conclusion.

2. THE STRUCTURE OF 1 CORINTHIANS

The two most common structures that exegetes propose for 1 Corinthians are that (a) the letter has two parts (§2.2) or (b) the letter has thematic groups (§2.3). I think the letter addresses ten parallel issues (§2.1).

2.1. The Letter Addresses Parallel Issues

I propose that 1 Corinthians addresses a string of ten controversial issues for the church. So, I outline the letter as follows:

³ Scripture quotations are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

⁴ See D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 420–47.

⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 3.

1. 1:1–9 = Introduction
2. 1:10–15:58 = Issues to which Paul responds based on reports about the Corinthians and a letter from the Corinthians
 - (1) 1:10–4:21 = Dividing over church teachers
 - (2) 5:1–13 = Tolerating incest
 - (3) 6:1–11 = Bringing lawsuits against one another
 - (4) 6:12–20 = Excusing sexual immorality
 - (5) 7:1–40 = Having sex in marriage, staying single, getting divorced, and getting married
 - (6) 8:1–11:1 = Eating food offered to idols
 - (7) 11:2–16 = Wearing head coverings
 - (8) 11:17–34 = Abusing the Lord's Supper
 - (9) 12:1–14:40 = Desiring and using spiritual gifts
 - (10) 15:1–58 = Denying that God will resurrect believers
3. 16:1–24 = Conclusion

What I propose is unusual. The closest proposal I am aware of is by Eckhard Schnabel, who divides the letter's body into ten parallel sections. But he categorizes four of the ten issues as conflict and the other six as compromise while I recognize both conflict and compromise mixed throughout (see §3.3):⁶

1. 1:10–4:21 = Konflikt I: Spaltungen in der Gemeinde [Conflict I: Divisions in the church]
2. 5:1–13 = Kompromiss I: Die wilde Ehe eines Gemeindeglieds [Compromise I: The illegitimate marriage of a church member]
3. 6:1–11 = Konflikt II: Das Prozessieren von Gemeindegliedern [Conflict II: Lawsuits among church members]
4. 6:12–20 = Kompromiss II: Der Verkehr mit Prostituierten [Compromise II: Sex with prostitutes]
5. 7:1–40 = Kompromiss III: Ehe und Verlobung [Compromise III: Marriage and engagement]
6. 8:1–11:1 = Kompromiss IV: Götzenopferfleisch und Götzentempel [Compromise IV: Food sacrificed to idols and idol temples]
7. 11:2–16 = Kompromiss V: Männer und Frauen im Gottesdienst [Compromise V: Men and women in worship]

⁶ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, 3rd ed., Historisch-Theologische Auslegung (Wuppertal: Brunnen, 2014), 3–5.

8. 11:17–34 = Konflikt III: Die Missstände beim Herrenmahl [Conflict III: The deplorable state of the Lord's Supper]
9. 12:1–14:40 = Konflikt IV: Die Gaben des Geistes in der Gemeinde [Conflict IV: The gifts of the Spirit in the church]
10. 15:1–58 = Kompromiss VI: Der Alltag und die Auferstehung [Compromise VI: Everyday life and the resurrection]

The next closest proposals I am aware of are by Ben Witherington, Richard Horsley, Richard Oster, Charles Talbert, David Garland, and Verlyn Verbrugge:

- Witherington and Horsley each list nine parallel “arguments.” They combine the three issues in 1 Corinthians 5–6 under one heading and include 16:1–12 as an additional argument.⁷
- Oster lists eight parallel issues. He combines the three issues in 1 Corinthians 5–6 and the two issues in 11:2–34, and he includes the collection in 16:1–11 as an additional issue.⁸
- Talbert lists eleven parallel issues. He divides chapter 7 into two issues (7:1–24 and 7:25–40).⁹
- Garland lists eight parallel issues. He combines the three issues in 1 Corinthians 5–6 under the heading “Incest, Lawsuits, and Prostitution.”¹⁰
- Verbrugge lists eight parallel issues. He combines the three issues in 1 Corinthians 11–14 under the heading “Response to Report on Problems in Worship.”¹¹

⁷ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), vi–viii; Richard A. Horsley, *1 Corinthians*, ANTC (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 7–9. As with his other commentaries on the NT letters, Witherington reads 1 Corinthians primarily through a socio-rhetorical grid.

⁸ Richard Oster, *1 Corinthians*, College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1995), 22.

⁹ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, 2nd ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), v.

¹⁰ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 21–23.

¹¹ Verlyn D. Verbrugge, “1 Corinthians,” in *Romans–Galatians*, 2nd ed., Expositor's Bible Commentary 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 256–57.

Exegetes agree that the letter has an introduction and conclusion.¹² But most do not place the body of the letter under a single main heading and then list all the issues Paul addresses as parallel to each other under that main heading. Most commentators—including Schnabel elsewhere (see §2.3)—divide the letter’s body into multiple parts, usually in one of two main ways (§§2.2 and 2.3).

2.2 The Letter Has Two Parts

Some exegetes divide the letter’s body in half: Paul responds to reports about the Corinthians in the first half (1:10–6:20), and Paul responds to a letter from the Corinthians in the second half (7:1–15:58 or partway into chap. 16). Two outlines illustrate this approach:

*Craig Blomberg*¹³

1. 1:10–6:20 = Paul responds to oral reports about the Corinthian church
 - a. 1:10–4:21 = Divisions in the church
 - b. 5:1–13 = A case of incest
 - c. 6:1–11 = Lawsuits between believers
 - d. 6:12–20 = The seriousness of sexual immorality in general
2. 7:1–16:4 = Paul responds to the letter from the Corinthians
 - a. 7:1–40 = Concerning marriage
 - b. 8:1–11:1 = Concerning food sacrificed to idols
 - c. 11:2–14:40 = Concerning worship
 - d. 15:1–58 = Concerning the resurrection
 - e. 16:1–4 = Concerning the collection for Jerusalem

¹² It is not clear whether the letter’s conclusion begins with 16:1 or somewhere later in chap. 16. The phrase “Now concerning” introduces issues four other times (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1), and the same phrase begins 16:1 and 16:12. Although Paul is likely responding to the Corinthians in 16:1 and 16:12, the issues Paul addresses there are not parallel in magnitude to the other issues in the letter. So, it makes sense to include these logistical house-keeping issues in chap. 16 as part of the letter’s conclusion.

¹³ Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 29–30; Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 165–66.

*Gordon Fee*¹⁴

1. 1:10–6:20 = In response to reports
 - a. 1:10–4:21 = A church divided—internally and against Paul
 - b. 5:1–6:20 = Immorality and litigation: [three] test cases of the crisis of authority and gospel
2. 7:1–16:12 = In response to the Corinthian letter
 - a. 7:1–40 = Marriage and related matters
 - b. 8:1–11:1 = Food sacrificed to idols
 - c. 11:2–16 = Women and men in worship
 - d. 11:17–34 = Abuse of the Lord’s Supper
 - e. 12:1–14:40 = On Spirit gifting and being people of the Spirit
 - f. 15:1–58 = The resurrection of believers
 - g. 16:1–11 = About the collection
 - h. 16:12 = About the coming of Apollos

But dividing the letter’s body in half does not work because chapters 11 and 15 likely respond to *reports* about the Corinthians—not to the Corinthian letter. Garland explains,

Paul alternates between reactions to the oral reports and answers to the Corinthian letter (Terry 1995: 43):

Oral reports (1:10–4:17 / 4:18–6:20)

Corinthian letter (7:1–40 / 8:1–11:1)

Oral reports (11:2–34)

Corinthian letter (12:1–14:40)

Oral reports (15:1–58)

Corinthian letter (16:1–12)¹⁵

Fee is aware of that, yet he sticks with his (flawed) two-part outline.¹⁶

¹⁴ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, viii–xi. Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, BNTC 7 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1968), 28–29; F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, NCB (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 9; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New Testament Commentary 18 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 27; Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 273.

¹⁵ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 21.

¹⁶ Cf. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 325: “Beginning at 7:1, he takes up issues from their letter, very likely in the order they occur. But when he comes

2.3 The Letter Has Thematic Groups

Many (probably most) exegetes combine the middle eight issues in 1 Corinthians 5–14 under larger groupings and thus divide the letter into thematic groups. Here are two common examples:

1. Chapters 5–7 address how to glorify God with your bodies, and chapters 8–14 address how to glorify God in your worship.
2. Chapters 5–6 deal with ethical confusion, chapters 7–10 with lifestyle issues, and chapters 11–14 with how to behave in church meetings.

Below are several examples:

*Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner*¹⁷

1. 1:10–4:17 = True and false wisdom and Corinthian factionalism
2. 4:18–7:40 = “Flee sexual immorality” and “glorify God with your bodies”
 - a. 4:18–6:20 = Negative treatment: “flee sexual immorality” (and greed)
 - b. 7:1–40 = Positive treatment: “glorify God with your bodies”
3. 8:1–14:40 = “Flee idolatry” and “glorify God” in your worship
 - a. 8:1–11:1 = Negative treatment: “flee idolatry” (food offered to idols)
 - b. 11:2–14:40 = Positive treatment: “glorify God” in your worship
4. 15:1–58 = The resurrection and consummation

*James Hamilton*¹⁸

1. 1–4 = Schisms
2. 5–7 = Sexual immorality

to a couple of matters dealing with worship (attending idol feasts and the abuse of tongues), he inserts two other matters of worship that he has information about (head coverings and abuse of the Lord’s Table). He puts the issue of the resurrection at the end of his response to Spirit giftings, because it probably reflects the false theology (or spirituality) that is responsible for the Corinthians’ attitudes on most of the other issues as well.”

¹⁷ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 24.

¹⁸ James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 457–61. Cf. Andreas Lindemann, *Der Erste*

3. 8–10 = Idolatry
4. 11–14 = Worship
5. 15 = Resurrection

*J. J. Lias*¹⁹

1. 1–4 = The divisions in the Corinthian church
2. 5–7 = Moral disorders in the Corinthian church
3. 8–14 = Social and ecclesiastical disorders in the Corinthian church
4. 15 = Doctrine of the resurrection

*Margaret Mitchell*²⁰

1. 1:18–4:21 = Censure of Corinthian factionalism and the need for Paul's advice
2. 5:1–11:1 = The integrity of the Corinthian community against outside defilement
3. 11:2–14:40 = Manifestations of Corinthian factionalism when "coming together"
4. 15:1–57 = The resurrection as the final goal

*Eckhard Schnabel*²¹

1. 1:10–4:21 = Divisions in the church

Korintherbrief, HNT 9/1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), vii–ix, 6–9; Paul Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, Focus on the Bible (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2000), 16; Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000), vi–xi; Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, NAC 28 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2014), 30–31. Lockwood begins each heading with "The word of the cross is the basis for the church's _____." The last words in the five divisions are *unity* (1:18–4:21), *holiness* (5:1–7:40), *freedom* (8:1–11:1), *worship* (11:2–14:40), and *hope* (15:1–58).

¹⁹ J. J. Lias, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, CGTSC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), xxxii–xxxix.

²⁰ Margaret Mary Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), x–xi. For a similar approach, see Victor Paul Furnish, *The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 16–18; Laura S. Nasrallah, "1 Corinthians," in *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament*, ed. Margaret Aymer, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and David A. Sánchez (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014), 431.

²¹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, "1 Corinthians," in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 2327. (This differs from

2. 5:1–6:20 = Ethical confusion in the church
3. 7:1–11:1 = Issues related to lifestyle
4. 11:2–14:40 = Issues related to behavior in church meetings
5. 15:1–58 = Resurrection

Bruce Winter²²

1. 1:4–4:21 = Christian approach to ministry in the church
2. 5:1–6:20 = Moral issues
3. 7:1–40 = Marriage problems
4. 8:1–11:1 = Gospel obligations in a pluralistic world
5. 11:2–14:40 = Orderly church life
6. 15:1–58 = The resurrection of the Christian's body

Grouping the issues thematically like that can be useful, especially since “chunking” related information helps us remember it.²³ But it is not sufficiently evident that Paul intentionally groups the issues in a particular thematic way. So, I think it is best to string out the issues in one long list.

I should qualify, however, that Paul intentionally addresses the ten issues in the order he does. It does not falsify my thesis to highlight that Paul starts with the cross in the first issue and ends with the resurrection

Schnabel's commentary, which outlines the letter's body as ten parallel issues; see §2.1 above.) For an outline with the same five divisions (but different wordings for the headings), see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), vi–xiii.

²² Bruce W. Winter, “1 Corinthians,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 1162–63. For outlines with basically the same six divisions (but different wordings for the headings), see Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed., TNTC 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 37–40; Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, 4 vols., EKKNT 7 (Zürich: Benziger, 1991–2001); J. Paul Sampley, “The First Letter to the Corinthians: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 12 vols. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002), 10:792–95; Michael G. Vanlaningham, “1 Corinthians,” in *The Moody Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary on the Whole Bible by the Faculty of Moody Bible Institute*, ed. Michael A. Rydelnik and Michael G. Vanlaningham (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 1775. For an outline that is almost a match but separates 11:2–34 and 16:1–12 as parallel units, see Dieter Zeller, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, KEK 5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 8–10, 48.

²³ Cf. Joshua Foer, *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

in the final issue. Simply because items in a list are parallel does not mean that their order does not matter:

- Sometimes the order may not matter. For example, “My MacBook is fast, light, and sleek.” I could also say, “My MacBook is sleek, fast, and light.” The order of the adjectives does not matter that much.
- Sometimes the order may matter. For example, “My MacBook starts up quickly, runs smoothly, and rarely crashes.” There is a logic to that order—namely, chronological progression.

The order in which Paul addresses the ten issues in 1 Corinthians matters. There is a logic of progression to his order, especially by ending with the resurrection. And, along the way he addresses issues that are related to each other (hence the various proposals for how Paul “chunks” the topics).²⁴ But I think the simplest way to outline the letter is to string out the ten issues in a list while recognizing that there is a logic to the progression.

3. THE THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE OF 1 CORINTHIANS

When Gordon Fee wrote an article titled “Toward a Theology of 1 Corinthians,” he explained, “The tentative nature of my title is related to the fact that of all the literature on 1 Corinthians (some 2,500 journal articles alone), there is not a single piece known to me that attempts this particular task: to deal with the theology of the letter as a whole.”²⁵ It is extremely

²⁴ See especially what Malcolm proposes: 1 Corinthians has an ABA' pattern. A = the *kerygma* of the cross in chaps. 1–4, and A' = the resurrection in chap. 15. A and A' frame B—Paul ethically applies the gospel in chaps. 5–14. See Matthew R. Malcolm, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reversal in 1 Corinthians: The Impact of Paul's Gospel on His Macro-Rhetoric*, SNTSMS 155 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), xiv–xvi; Malcolm, “Structure and Theme,” 264–65. Malcolm's ABA' pattern throughout chaps. 5–14 seems artificial to me, but the reason may be that I am not as familiar with macro-chiasms as ancient writers were. On chiasms, see Craig A. Smith, “Criteria for Biblical Chiasms: Objective Means for Distinguishing Chiasm of Design from Accidental and False Chiasm” (PhD diss., University of Bristol, 2009). Malcolm argues more convincingly that Paul progresses from the individual body to the corporate body in chaps. 5–14 (Malcolm, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reversal in 1 Corinthians*, 222).

²⁵ Gordon D. Fee, “Toward a Theology of 1 Corinthians,” in *Pauline Theology II: 1 and 2 Corinthians*, ed. David M. Hay, SymS (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2002), 37. Fortress Press first published that article in 1993, six years after Fee's 1987 NICNT commentary.

difficult to summarize the theological message of 1 Corinthians because the letter responds to at least ten different issues (see §2.1). The space Paul devotes to single issues in 1 Corinthians rivals the length of other *entire letters* he wrote (see Fig. 1).

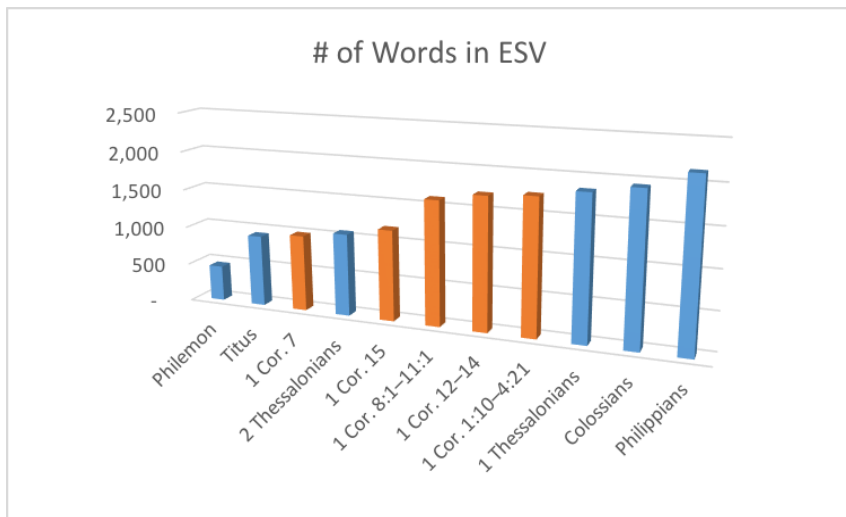


Figure 1. Comparing the Length of Sections in 1 Corinthians with Paul's Other Letters

A book's *theological message* is the author's overall burden—the book's main theme or gist. It is not always the same as its *content* (what the author is writing about) or *purpose* (why the author is writing). Here is how I propose stating the theological message of 1 Corinthians in one sentence: *The gospel requires God's holy people to mature in purity and unity.*²⁶ What follows unpacks that sentence in three steps.

3.1. "The Gospel Requires . . ."

The one theme that drives everything Paul writes in 1 Corinthians is the gospel. "The gospel is the central issue."²⁷

²⁶ I drafted that sentence while memorizing 1 Corinthians (see <http://andy.naselli.com/why-and-how-to-memorize-an-entire-book-of-the-bible>). It was confirming a few years later to read Malcolm observe, "There is broad agreement that certain topics are crucial. The three that are repeatedly mentioned in recent scholarship are: the cross, holiness, and unity" ("Structure and Theme," 267).

²⁷ Fee, "Toward a Theology of 1 Corinthians," 40. Cf. Schnabel, "1 Corinthians," 2325: "What connects all these subjects [in 1 Corinthians] is the gospel: God forgives and saves people through Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Savior and Lord—a fundamental reality that directly affects the life of the church and

Here is one way to define the gospel narrowly in a single sentence: *Jesus lived, died, and rose again for sinners, and God will save you if you turn from your sins and trust Jesus.*²⁸ That is good news not just for non-Christians. It continues to be good news for Christians. And it affects everything about how to live as a Christian.

Paul uses the noun εὐαγγέλιον (“gospel”) seven times and the verb εὐαγγελίζω (“proclaim the gospel”) five times:

1:17: For Christ did not send me to baptize but to *preach the gospel* [εὐαγγελίζω], and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

4:15b: I became your father in Christ Jesus through *the gospel* [εὐαγγέλιον].

9:12b: we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of *the gospel* [εὐαγγέλιον] of Christ.

9:14: In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim *the gospel* [εὐαγγέλιον] should get their living by *the gospel* [εὐαγγέλιον].

9:16: For if *I preach the gospel* [εὐαγγελίζω], that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if *I do not preach the gospel* [εὐαγγελίζω]!

9:18: What then is my reward? That in my *preaching* [εὐαγγελίζω] I may present *the gospel* [εὐαγγέλιον] free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in *the gospel* [εὐαγγέλιον].

9:23: I do it all for the sake of *the gospel* [εὐαγγέλιον], that I may share with them in its blessings.

15:1–2: Now I would remind you, brothers, of *the gospel* [εὐαγγέλιον] I *preached* [εὐαγγελίζω] 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* [εὐαγγελίζω] to you—unless you believed in vain.

Although the noun and verb for gospel may appear only twelve times, the concept permeates the entire letter.²⁹ “Christ crucified” (1:23) and risen

individual believers.” Cf. Raymond Pickett, *The Cross in Corinth: The Social Significance of the Death of Jesus*, JSNTSup 143 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 37–125; Zeller, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, 64–66; Malcolm, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reversal in 1 Corinthians*, 40–41. See also Matthew R. Malcolm, “Paul’s Pastoral Sensitivity in 1 Corinthians,” in *Paul as Pastor*, ed. Brian S. Rosner, Andrew S. Malone, and Trevor J. Burke (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 43–54.

²⁸ See Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 296–300.

²⁹ Cf. Furnish, *Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians*, 18, 25, 54–55.

(chap. 15) is central. The gospel solves every issue Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians because the gospel (and its presuppositions and consequences) is decisive for every issue regarding how Christians should live. Some argue that the gospel does not connect to how Paul addresses head coverings (11:2–16) or spiritual gifts (12:1–14:40),³⁰ but I think the gospel connects in some way to every issue. The connection between Corinthian problems and gospel solutions is usually *direct* (e.g., 1:10–4:21; 8:1–11:1; chap. 15), but sometimes the solution *presupposes* the gospel (e.g., 11:2–16) or *flows from* the gospel (e.g., chaps. 7 and 12–14). The following list briefly shows how the gospel solves the ten main problems Paul addresses.

Issue 1: 1 Corinthians 1:10–4:21

Problem. Some Corinthian Christians were dividing over church teachers. They embraced the values of their Roman society, which divided over ethnicity (e.g., Jews vs. Gentiles) and social rank (wise vs. foolish, powerful vs. weak, noble birth vs. low and despised). Roman culture valued polished rhetoric and regarded the message of a crucified Messiah as folly.

Gospel solution. “Christ crucified” is the power and wisdom of God (and confounds Roman values). God uses church teachers to plant and water the church, but God alone gives the growth. So, don’t boast in particular church teachers because they are merely servants of Christ. Boast in the Lord.

Issue 2: 1 Corinthians 5:1–13

Problem. Some Corinthian Christians were tolerating incest.

Gospel solution. Purge the evil person from among you because Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

Issue 3: 1 Corinthians 6:1–11

Problem. Some Corinthian Christians were bringing lawsuits against one another.

Gospel solution. Don’t wrong and defraud your own brothers because the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God. Unrepentant sin formerly characterized your life, but God washed, sanctified, and justified you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by God’s Spirit.

³⁰ Fee, “Toward a Theology of 1 Corinthians,” 39; Schnabel, “1 Corinthians,” 2325. Cf. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 17: “The cross, its wisdom or its effect, is also pivotal in every issue except the one concerning headdress.”

Issue 4: 1 Cor 6:12–20

Problem. Some Corinthian Christians were excusing sexual immorality because it occurs outside the body.

Gospel solution. Your body matters because God will raise it up like he raised the Lord. Your body is a member of Christ, so you shouldn't make it a member of a prostitute. You don't have the right to do whatever you want with your body because God owns it, and he owns it because he redeemed you at the cost of his Son's life. So, glorify God with your body by not committing sexual immorality.³¹

Issue 5: 1 Corinthians 7:1–40

Problem. Some Corinthian Christians were asking about God's rules for marriage and singleness.

Gospel solution. God graciously gives singleness to some and marriage to others. Lead the life the Lord has assigned to you. (And don't become a bondservant of men because God bought you with a price: Christ crucified.) If you marry, marry "only in the Lord."

Issue 6: 1 Cor 8:1–11:1

Problem. Some Corinthian Christians were eating food offered to idols in a way that did not build up their neighbors or in a way that participated with demons.

Gospel solution. Don't make your brother stumble because Christ died for that brother. Be willing to give up your rights for the sake of the gospel. You can't participate with both (a) the blood and body of Christ and (b) demons.³²

Issue 7: 1 Corinthians 11:2–16

Problem. The Corinthian Christians could wear or not wear head coverings in a way that defiantly flouted God's beautiful design for husbands and wives.

³¹ Cf. Andrew David Naselli, "Is Every Sin Outside the Body except Immoral Sex? Weighing Whether 1 Cor. 6:18b Is Paul's Statement or a Corinthian Slogan," *JBL* 136 (2017): 969–86.

³² Cf. Andrew David Naselli, "Was It Always Idolatrous for Corinthian Christians to Eat *Eiδωλόθυτα* in an Idol's Temple? (1 Cor. 8–10)," *Southeastern Theological Review* 9 (2018): forthcoming.

Gospel solution. Husband : wife :: the Father : the Son. The husband-wife relationship reflects the Father-Son relationship with reference to authority and submission.³³

Issue 8: 1 Corinthians 11:17–34

Problem. Some more affluent Corinthian Christians were abusing the Lord’s Supper by marginalizing poor Christians.

Gospel solution. Jesus gave his body and blood for the church, so don’t despise it. When you celebrate the Lord’s Supper, you proclaim his death until he comes. So, sacrificially share food with one another when you celebrate how Jesus sacrificed his life for you.

Issue 9: 1 Corinthians 12:1–14:40

Problem. Some Corinthian Christians were prioritizing less valuable spiritual gifts and failing to use their gifts to edify the body of Christ in love.

Gospel solution. Pursue love (which the gospel embodies) by earnestly desiring and using spiritual gifts that build up the Spirit-baptized body of Christ.

Issue 10: 1 Corinthians 15:1–58

Problem. Some Corinthian Christians were denying that God will bodily resurrect believers.

Gospel solution. Christ died for our sins, and God bodily resurrected him. If God will not bodily resurrect believers, then he did not bodily resurrect Christ. But he did bodily resurrect Christ and therefore will bodily resurrect believers.

³³ Theologians debate whether that Father-Son relationship is eternal (and thus applies to the immanent or ontological Trinity) or whether it applies only to Jesus’s earthly ministry (and thus applies only to the economic or functional Trinity). See Jack Jeffery, “The Trinity Debate Bibliography: The Complete List—Is It Okay to Teach a Complementarianism Based on Eternal Subordination?” *Books at a Glance*, available online at <http://www.booksataglance.com/blog/trinity-debate-bibliography-complete-list/>. According to either view, the logic of 1 Cor. 11 about authority and submission stands. On why *κεφαλή* means *authority* and not *source*, see Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than One Hundred Disputed Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 201–11, 552–99.

3.2. “. . . God’s Holy People to Mature . . .”

When you describe the Corinthian church, *holy* is not one of the first adjectives that comes to mind. At least some of the members were sinfully divisive over church teachers, tolerating incest, suing each other, excusing having sex with prostitutes, claiming that it is good not to have sex with one’s spouse, proudly claiming that they had special knowledge, clinging to their rights in a way that did not build up fellow believers, abusing fellow believers when they celebrated the Lord’s Supper, misevaluating and misusing spiritual gifts, and denying that God will resurrect believers. It is these people whom Paul addresses as “those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints” (1:2). All Christians are “saints” or God’s holy people, but that does not mean they are sinless. God’s holy people gradually become what they already are—*holy*. They must mature like a child grows into an adult (3:1–4; 13:11) or a seed sprouts and grows into a plant (3:6–8). God’s holy people must become what they already are (5:7; 6:11, 15–20).

3.3. “. . . In Purity and Unity”

The Corinthian church needed to mature in two main areas: purity and unity. The church needed to mature in purity to counteract the society’s worldly values,³⁴ and it needed to mature in unity to solve conflicts within the church. Some exegetes argue that the letter’s theme is purity,³⁵ and more argue that it is unity.³⁶

Schnabel refers to those two categories as *compromise* (purity) and *conflict* (unity), and as I share above in §2.1, he categorizes four of the ten issues in 1 Corinthians as conflict and the other six as compromise. But I think it is artificial to place each of the main issues neatly in either the purity category (i.e., compromise with the Greco-Roman society’s non-Christian and hedonistic values) or the unity category (i.e., conflict within

³⁴ “Worldliness,” asserts Jason Meyer, “is anything that makes rebellion against God look appealing and normal instead of appalling and shocking” (Twitter comment, October 23, 2017, <https://twitter.com/WePreachChrist/status/922462067675815937>). Cf. Andrew David Naselli, “Do Not Love the World: Breaking the Evil Enchantment of Worldliness (A Sermon on 1 John 2:15–17),” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 21, no. 3 (2018), forthcoming.

³⁵ E.g., Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, “The Structure and Argument of 1 Corinthians: A Biblical/Jewish Approach,” *NTS* 52 (2006): 205–18. Ciampa and Rosner expanded that article in the introduction to their 2010 commentary, where they continue to argue that “Purity issues are of greater concern to him [i.e., Paul] than the issue of communal harmony” (*First Corinthians*, 21–22).

³⁶ E.g., Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, IBC (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997), 21.

the Corinthian church). It is artificial because (1) all the problems Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians stem from embracing Roman society's impure values (i.e., compromise) and (2) embracing those impure values results in disunity in the church (i.e., conflict). So, correcting the impurity (compromise) is the way to correct the disunity (conflict):

1. Don't divide over church teachers (1:10–4:21).
2. Don't tolerate flagrant sin in the church (5:1–13).
3. Don't bring lawsuits against one another (6:1–11).
4. Don't indulge in sexual immorality (6:12–20).
5. Lead the life the Lord has assigned to you with reference to marriage and singleness (7:1–40).
6. Be willing to give up your rights for the sake of the gospel; live in a way (eating, drinking, etc.) that glorifies God by building up your neighbor; don't eat food offered to idols if it makes you a participant with demons (8:1–11:1).
7. When the church gathers to worship, men should not wear head coverings, and women should wear them (11:2–16).
8. Don't celebrate the Lord's Supper in a way that divides believers into the haves and the have-nots (11:17–34).
9. Desire the most edifying spiritual gifts and use the gifts the Spirit gives you to build up the body of Christ in love (12:1–14:40).
10. Affirm that God will bodily resurrect believers (15:1–58).

Another way to say that God's holy people must mature *in purity and unity* is that they must mature *in love*.³⁷ Paul's concluding words include five exhortations in 16:13–14 that culminate in the final one: "Let all that you do be done in love."

4. CONCLUSION

The most plausible structure for 1 Corinthians is that the letter addresses a string of ten parallel controversial issues in the church. The letter's theological message is that the gospel requires God's holy people to mature in purity and unity.

³⁷ See Brian S. Rosner, "The Logic and Arrangement of 1 Corinthians," in *The Wisdom of the Cross: Exploring 1 Corinthians*, ed. Brian S. Rosner (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2011), 18–21.