

# The Structure and Argument of 1 Corinthians: A Biblical/Jewish Approach

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This article argues that when the fundamentally Jewish character of 1 Corinthians is recognized, a clear structure and argument emerges. The order of the material reflects Paul's own agenda seen in patterns elsewhere in his letters. While unity is clearly a significant issue, Paul's main concern is with the purity of the church and the glory of God. The Corinthian church is part of the fulfillment of the OT expectation of worldwide worship of the God of Israel, and as God's eschatological temple they must act in a manner appropriate to their holy status by shunning pagan vices and glorifying God under the lordship of Christ.

## Introduction

The structure and integrity of 1 Corinthians has been the subject of long debate. The apparent diversity of issues treated in the letter has led to equally diverse approaches to understanding its structure, argument and essential nature. Scholars have argued that the letter is actually a composite document.<sup>1</sup> Such theories grow out of a conviction that 1 Corinthians is not only unusually long, but also lacks a discernable global structure. Although Jerome Murphy-O'Connor rejects such partition theories, he finds them understandable in that, in his view, '[t]he salient feature of I Corinthians is the absence of any detectable logic in the arrangement of its contents'.<sup>2</sup>

1 A. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 36–7, mentions the partition theories of J. Weiss (who suggested there were two or three underlying letters), W. Schmithals (three), K. K. Yeo (four) and R. Jewett (five). See H. Merklein, 'Die Einheitlichkeit des ersten Korintherbriefes', *ZNW* 75 (1984) 153–83; and M. M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), for effective responses to such partition theories. For a brief discussion see F. Lang, *Die Brief an die Korinther* (NTD 7; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986) 6–7.

2 J. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University, 1996) 253.

For many the only logic of the letter's arrangement is that Paul deals with oral reports in chs. 1–6 before addressing matters raised in the Corinthian letter to him in chs. 7–16 (7.1: 'Now concerning [περὶ δέ] the matters about which you wrote'; cf. περὶ δέ repeated in 7.25; 8.1; 12.1; 16.1, 12). Murphy-O'Connor exemplifies those scholars who argue for the integrity of the epistle as we have it but find great difficulty in discerning an overall structure. David Garland suggests the letter 'may be summed up as a warning against various perils',<sup>3</sup> and his outline of the letter entails a listing of topics under twelve Roman numerals.<sup>4</sup> However, Margaret Mitchell and others have raised doubts over whether the order of material in 1 Corinthians is actually dictated by the sequence in which the issues are raised in the oral and written reports that Paul received.<sup>5</sup> Mitchell's work represents an important step forward in that she pursues a more significant underlying unity to the letter. Many commentators follow her in affirming that Paul's main purpose in writing 1 Corinthians is to unify the congregation.

Rhetorical and other approaches have also been used to analyze the structure of this letter.<sup>6</sup> Many see the letter as an example of deliberative rhetoric, a series of arguments Paul musters to persuade the audience to heed his appeal to unity in 1.10. Hence, 1.10 is thought to be the theme statement for the entire letter.<sup>7</sup> In 1.18–4.21 Paul opposes disunity in the church in general; in chs. 5–16 he takes on

3 D. E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 21.

4 B. Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) vi–viii, 76, similarly breaks the main body (the *probatio*, in his understanding) of Paul's letter (1.18–16.12) into nine distinct 'arguments'.

5 M. Mitchell, 'Concerning περὶ δέ in 1 Cor', *NovT* 31 (1989) 229–56, disputes the assumption that περὶ δέ in 1 Corinthians always signals a reference to the letter Paul received from the Corinthians (see also Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 34–5). A number of other commentators notice that in chs. 7–16 Paul deals with oral reports in 11.2–34 and 15.1–58.

6 See, e.g., Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*; H. D. Betz and M. Mitchell, 'First Epistle to the Corinthians', *ABD* 1:1139–54; Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, vi–viii, 76.

7 Among those who support this view are W. H. Wuellner, 'Greek Rhetoric and Pauline Argumentation', *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition* (ed. W. R. Schoedel and R. L. Wilken; Paris: Beauchesne, 1979) 177–88: '[1.10] expresses the main theme of the whole of 1 Cor[inthians]' (182–3); G. A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina, 1984) 24: 'He follows this [1.4–9] with the proposition of the entire letter, summarised in a single sentence'; and most fully Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, whose book is in effect an examination of 1 Corinthians in the light of the thesis that Paul wrote with one overriding aim, that is, to persuade the Corinthians Christians to become unified. She claims that this was the understanding of some of the earliest readers of the letter, including 1 Clement, Ignatius of Antioch, the Muratorian Canon and the early Greek commentators. Even R. B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997) 21, calls it 'the fundamental theme of the letter'. A better candidate might be not being conformed to the world, or more positively, living as 'those sanctified in Christ Jesus' (1.2).

the issues that must be dealt with before genuine unity can be achieved. First Corinthians, then, is Paul's attempt to urge the Corinthians to come together in unity.

While it is true that disunity is a major theme of the letter, extending beyond chs. 1–4,<sup>8</sup> to give it primacy obscures other equally important concerns. Our contention is that rather than reading 1 Corinthians with Graeco-Roman rhetorical categories in mind, it is better to take OT and Jewish frames of reference as the primary lens that clarifies our understanding of both the form and contents of the letter.<sup>9</sup> In this light, disunity is one of several behaviors that characterize the Corinthians as 'worldly', as 'acting like mere human beings' (3.3). Paul's goal is bigger than merely having them live harmoniously.

### The Structure of 1 Corinthians

It is widely recognized that in early Jewish and Christian thinking Gentiles were consistently characterized by two particularly abhorrent vices: sexual immorality and idolatry. For example, in relation to NT evidence, Peder Borgen notes that the vice lists of Gal 5.19–21 and 1 Cor 6.9–11, which in context contrast pagan and Christian lifestyles, have only these two sins in common. They also occur in Col 3.5; Eph 5.5; Acts 15.20, 29; 21.25; Rev 22.15. Borgen concludes that '[t]hese two vices are central in Jewish characterising of the pagan way of life'.<sup>10</sup> A clear example from early Jewish writings is the *Sibylline Oracles*, for as J. J. Collins observes, '[t]he sins in which the Sibyl expresses most interest are idolatry and sexual offenses'.<sup>11</sup> Of particular interest for 1 Corinthians is *Sib. Or.* 3, '[t]he main message of [which] ... would seem to lie in the denunciation of idolatry and sexual abuses and then the advocacy of the Temple'.<sup>12</sup> That the emphasis on these two vices in early Jewish and Christian thought is based on scriptural interpretation can be seen in William Loader's observation that much Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Decalogue elevates the prohibition of adultery above murder such that idolatry heads the first table and sexual immorality the second.<sup>13</sup>

8 The letter contains not only explicit references to Corinthian factionalism but also many terms, appeals and themes that deal with divisions in the church. See Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 68–80, 180–3.

9 On the use of the OT in 1 Corinthians, see B. S. Rosner and R. E. Ciampa, '1 Corinthians', *Commentary on the Use of the Old Testament in the New* (ed. D. A. Carson and G. K. Beale; Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).

10 P. Borgen, *Early Christianity and Hellenistic Judaism* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998) 240, 245.

11 J. J. Collins, 'Sibylline Oracles', *OTP* 1:317–472 (323).

12 Collins, 'Sibylline Oracles', 1:357.

13 W. Loader, *The Septuagint, Sexuality and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 7: Exod LXX (ms B), Mark 7.21–22 (mss  $\aleph$ , B), Nash Papyrus, Deut LXX (ms B), Philo, Rom 13:9, Mark 10:19 (ms A), Luke 18.20, James 2.11. 'The effect is to make it [adultery] the first of

While no consensus has been achieved, much recent work on the problems Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians points to the infiltration of Corinthian social values into that city's church.<sup>14</sup> Our contention is that Paul's attempt to sort out the serious problems within the largely Gentile church in Corinth consists primarily of a confrontation with the church over purity concerns in general and these two vices in particular.<sup>15</sup> His focus on the issues of sexual immorality and

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the second table, thus to elevate its significance for hearers who sense this bipartite division of the decalogue, suggested to hearers by the two tablets of stone (Exod 31.18) and by the changed focus of the content in the second half. Adultery receives, in that sense, greater prominence' (Loader, *The Septuagint, Sexuality and the New Testament*, 7). See his fuller discussion of the Decalogue on pp. 5–25.

- 14 For example, W. Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (1 Kor 1,6–6,11) (EKKNT 7/1; Zürich/Braunschweig: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1991) 42, who, in discussing the various influences on the Corinthians, reminds us that 'bleiben auch nach einer Bekehrung die Kontakte zur heidnischen Umwelt wie etwa in Mischehen (7,12–16), am Arbeitsplatz (vgl. 4,12), auf Märkten (10,25), bei Einladungen (vgl. 10,27) und anderswo ein Einfallstor für mancherlei soziale, weltanschauliche, religiöse und andere Beeinflussungen'; Thiselton makes much of 'the impact of the culture of Corinth upon the developing faith of newly converted believers' (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, xviii); B. W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 27, suggests 'the problems which arose subsequent to Paul's departure did so partly because the Christians were "cosmopolitans", i.e., citizens of this world and, in particular, citizens or residents of Roman Corinth' and thus 'the primary influences on the responses of the Christians were derived principally from *Romanitas*' (28); R. B. Terry (*A Discourse Analysis of First Corinthians*, [Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1995] 57) argues that 'most, if not all, of the problems which Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians can be attributed to the influence of the Corinthian cultural setting on the Christians there'; Hays explicitly rejects the suggestion that over-realized eschatology is to blame for the Corinthian problems and suggests it was not the Corinthians but Paul who formulated the issues in theological terms: 'In many cases the practices of the Corinthians were motivated by social and cultural factors – such as popular philosophy and rhetoric – that were not consciously theological at all' (*First Corinthians*, 8); Garland rejects other suggested influences, arguing that 'the influences on them were more amorphous and that their behavior was swayed by culturally ingrained habits from their pagan past and by values instilled by a popularized secular ethics' (1 *Corinthians*, 13); see also A. D. Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1–6* (AGJU 18; Leiden/New York: E. J. Brill, 1993).
- 15 D. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven/London: Yale University, 1995) 163, makes a point similar to our own, although on a more limited scale. 'Paul's concerns about Christian men visiting prostitutes (6:12–20); the debate about eating meat sacrificed to idols (chaps. 8–10); and Paul's claim that some Corinthians have become sick or have died owing to improper eating of the Lord's Supper (11:17–24)' are issues that biblical scholars typically treat 'as separate questions that are addressed seriatim by Paul', though Martin suggests 'they are particular instances of what is essentially a single conflict regarding the boundaries of the body', which reflects 'Paul's concern for purity and avoidance of pollution'. Of course, Martin is thinking in terms of contemporary sociological and anthropological approaches rather than the perspective of ancient Jewish and Christian views of purity.

idolatry suggests that purity issues are of greater concern to him than the issue of communal harmony. Concern about purity issues is to be expected in a situation where the infiltration of outside influences is believed to have deleterious effects on the health of the worshipping community.<sup>16</sup> As David deSilva argues, the gospel had a significant transforming effect on Christian thinking about purity issues, but '[h]oliness and purity both still require boundaries to be drawn and maintained between the surrounding culture and the Christian group'.<sup>17</sup> In 1 Corinthians purity issues are reflected most specifically in the identification of the readers as the temple of God (3.17) and the discussion of the moral implications of that understanding. The command to 'clean out the old leaven' (5.7) and to 'purge the evil person' from their midst (5.11–13) reflects the language of purity concerns, and his command to avoid prostitutes is based on the radical impurity that would bring to their Spirit-indwelt temple (6.16–19). Purity concerns are also reflected in the issue of the children's uncleanness or holiness based on the status of the unbelieving husband (7.14) and in the concern not to provoke the Lord by drinking from both his cup and those of demons (10.21–22). 'Much of Paul's use of purity terminology', Michael Newton points out, 'centres upon his view that the believers constitute the Temple of God and as such enjoy the presence of God in their midst', and if that presence is to remain with them they must maintain the purity of the community.<sup>18</sup> The broader issue of the influence of Corinthian cultural values and behaviors within the church of that city is to be understood as a fundamental concern for the purity of the worshipping community. Jacob Neusner highlights the place of idolatry and sexual relations in the biblical texts that deal with the question of impurity<sup>19</sup> while Christine Hayes points to a number of Pauline passages that 'suggest that the impurity of unbelievers, arising from deeds of sexual immorality and idolatry in particular, defiles the holiness of believers'.<sup>20</sup> Judith Lieu speaks of '[t]he pervasive rejection of the ways of the Gentiles, epitomized by idolatry and by a range of other "vices" of sexual and intemperate behaviour' as boundary markers found in much 'early Christian'

16 As pointed out by J. M. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford University, 2004) 104, '[t]he need to observe sacred boundaries, variously articulated, but in Judaism particularly through food and purity laws and the structuring of the Temple, correlates with the importance laid on well-defined and well-protected social boundaries'.

17 D. A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000) 294.

18 M. Newton, *The Concept of Purity at Qumran and in the Letters of Paul* (SNTSMS 53; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1985) 52.

19 J. Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973) 13–5.

20 C. E. Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2002) 93.

literature.<sup>21</sup> She also sees sexual immorality and eating food offered to idols as ‘scripturally hallowed models of the dissolution of identity’.<sup>22</sup>

The association between sexual immorality and idolatry is so strong that the question must be asked whether Paul’s discussion of sexual immorality can actually be distinguished from his discussion of idolatry or if the two should be seen as two ways of addressing the same issue – namely, spiritual unfaithfulness to the God of Israel.<sup>23</sup> But while adultery and sexual promiscuity are standard metaphors for spiritual unfaithfulness, the association between the vices of sexual immorality and idolatry should not be used to reduce the two to one basic offense. As in *T. Reuben* 4.6, where sexual promiscuity draws one towards idolatry, Paul sees idolatry leading to sexual immorality or sexual immorality leading to idolatry (Rom 1.21–28) and, like much Jewish literature, sees them going hand-in-hand (e.g. 1 Cor 10.7–8).

We suggest that in 4.18–7.40<sup>24</sup> Paul deals primarily with issues related to sexual immorality, first in a negative treatment of its manifestations in the church in

21 Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 133.

22 Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 137 and n. 110.

23 See Neusner, *The Idea of Purity*, 14, where he suggests sexual relations and idolatry are both prominent concerns in texts dealing with impurity due to the parallel between marital faithfulness and faithfulness to God and ‘very commonly the metaphor of sexual disloyalty is applied to Israel’s relationship to God’. Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 137, suggests that in Revelation’s references to fornication and idolatry “‘fornication’ is probably a scriptural model of “unfaithfulness” pictured as sexual promiscuity’.

24 Even though ‘practically all commentaries and translations’ (P. Ellingworth and H. A. Hatton, *Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians* [UBS Handbook; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994] 101; Ellingworth and Hatton themselves are in two minds) assume that Paul finishes his treatment of divisions at the end of ch. 4, and turns to the subject of the incestuous man at the beginning of ch. 5, there are good reasons to take 4.18–21 as introducing what follows rather than concluding what precedes. 4.18–21 should not be divided since these verses deal with one subject, namely, Paul’s proposed visit to Corinth. Three observations suggest that they belong with chs. 5 and 6. First, the threatening tone of 4.21 (‘a rod of discipline’) is more in keeping with what follows than what precedes; note that contrast with 4.14 where Paul lightly admonishes the Corinthians as children. Secondly, 4.18–21 introduces ideas that are picked up in chapter five: ‘being puffed up’ (4.18–19; 5.2); ‘power’ (4.19–20; 5.4); and Paul being present (4.19; 5.3–4). Thirdly, 4.16–17 contains ideas that are found in other verses that close sections (imitating Paul [4.16; 11.1] and ‘the practice of all the churches’ [4.17; 11.16]), and has elements that form an inclusio with 1.10 (the verb to ‘appeal/urge’ [1.10; 4.16]; the call to unity in 1.10 is reiterated with the call to imitate Paul’s example in 4.16). The main argument for taking 4.18–21 with what follows rather than with what precedes is the tone of the passage. Garland’s observation is accurate even if he fails to draw the obvious conclusion: ‘In these opening chapters [1–4] Paul insinuates that the church is riven by unnecessary strife fed by unjustified spiritual pride. Threatening to come after them with a rod (4.21), however, seems a bit extreme to settle such problems. The three cases cited in 5.1–6.20 make that threat more understandable’ (*1 Corinthians*, 151; Garland persists with taking 4.18–21 as part of chs. 1–4). Paul’s mood takes a turn for the worse when he discusses the pressing issues

Corinth (4.18–6.20) and then in a positive treatment of marriage and sexual relationships<sup>25</sup> (ch. 7; note how the chapter is introduced in v. 2 with a reference to πορνεία).<sup>26</sup> And chs. 8–14 deal with the issue of idolatry, beginning, again, with a negative treatment of its manifestations in Corinth (8.1–11.1) and then moving to a more positive treatment of the proper worship of the one true God (chs. 11–14;<sup>27</sup> note how 12.2 relates the following material back to the issue of idolatry).<sup>28</sup> Paul explicitly ties these two vices to OT background in his discussion of Israel's

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of chs. 5 and 6. Numerous rhetorical questions, exclamations and other stylistic features point to a more emotive appeal than in the section on divisions. The stern warning of 4.18–21 sets up what Thiselton rightly calls Paul's response to 'Moral Issues which Demand a Clear-Cut Verdict (5:1–6:20)'. If the Corinthians are not free of the problems of incest, lawsuits and prostitution, Paul will indeed have to come with 'a rod of discipline'. For a fuller defense see the forthcoming Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) on 1 Corinthians by B. S. Rosner and R. E. Ciampa.

25 This arrangement of ethical material is reminiscent of Hellenistic Jewish parenesis (reported by K.-W. Niebuhr, *Gesetz und Paränese: katechismusartige Weisungsreihen in der frühjüdischen Literatur* [WUNT 2.28. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987] 232) which discusses sexual deviations, such as incest and homosexuality, and sexual relations in marriage in close proximity.

26 1 Cor 5.1–6.20, covering incest, lawsuits and prostitution, should be taken together with 7.1–40, on sexual relations, divorce and marriage, as a single unit. A. S. May observes: 'Paul's decision to connect his response to the oral report and the issues raised by the letter, even if only sequentially, may well indicate that the form of 5.1–7.40, although responsive, is *his* construct for *his* reasons' (*The Body for the Lord: Sex and Identity in 1 Corinthians 5–7* [London/New York: T & T Clark, 2004] 3 [italics original]). 1 Cor 4.18–7.40, as May (pp. 3–4) argues, are also united by a number of linguistic and conceptual links. These include: the boundaries of the physical body (6.12–20; 7.4); the discussion of 'authority' (ἐξουσία); the argument that the Corinthians 'were bought at a price' (6.20; 7.23); and more generally the compatibility of sexual and spiritual unions in 6.12–20 and ch. 7.

27 W. Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther (1 Kor 6,12–11,16)* (EKKNT 7/2; Zürich/Braunschweig: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1991) 487, takes 11.2–14.40 to be one section covering 'Gottesdienstfragen'.

28 That chs. 8–14 form a unit of text is suggested by the way the motif of edification is introduced in 8.1 and comes to its climax in ch. 14 (cf. vv. 3, 4, 5, 12, 17, 26). The relationship between love and edification that is explicitly established in 8.1 and underlies Paul's discussion in chs. 8–10 is reflected in chs. 12–14 (esp. 13–14) as well. S. Kim (*Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002] 26 n. 94) has suggested that '[i]n 1 Cor 10:14–11:1 Paul summarizes and concludes his long, careful discussion of the problem of eating the meat offered to idols (1 Cor 8–10) in terms of the principles of Christian liberty and the double command of love, the wholehearted devotion to God which excludes idolatry, and the love of neighbors which demands giving up one's right for the sake of the weak brethren'. Similarly, S. Youngman ('Stratificational Analysis of a Hortatory Text: I Corinthians 8:1–11:1' [M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, 1987] 128) has summarized the theme of 1 Cor 8.1–11.1 as 'do everything out of love for God and people; restrict the exercise of your rights for the sake of the gospel'. If they are correct about the motif of love underlying chs. 8–10, the explicit presence of that motif in 13.1–14.1 suggests that it may be the unifying climax of chs. 8–14 as well as an explanatory aside to chs. 12–14.



failures in 1 Cor 10.7–8, and their inclusion in the vice list of 5.11 is based on their inclusion in a list of sins associated with a Deuteronomic expulsion formula.<sup>29</sup>

Towards the end of each negative section (4.18–6.20 and 8.1–11.1) Paul provides both negative and positive imperatives using the same language relating to the broader theme. In concluding the negative section on sexual immorality, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to ‘flee (φεύγετε) sexual immorality’ (6.18) and to ‘glorify God (δοξάσατε δὴ τὸν θεόν)’ with their bodies (6.20). In concluding the negative section on idolatry, Paul exhorts them to ‘flee (φεύγετε) idolatry’ (10.14) and to do everything ‘to the glory of God (εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ)’ (10.31).<sup>30</sup>

Thus 4.18–7.40 and 8.1–14.40 can be seen as discreet units dealing with issues of sexuality and worship respectively. Almost all commentators see chs. 1–4 and 15 as unified sections, the former discussing divisions and wisdom (which also betrays a negative/positive structure; see below), and the latter, resurrection and consummation.

We propose that the main sections of the letter may thus be outlined as follows:

- I. Letter Opening (1.1–9)
- II. True and False Wisdom and Corinthian Factionalism (1.10–4.17)
  - A. Factions in the Community (1.10–17)
  - B. Negative Treatment: The Wisdom of this World (1.18–2.5)
  - C. Positive Treatment: The Wisdom of the Cross and the Spirit (2.6–3.4)
  - D. Application to the Church, Ministers and Ministry (3.5–4.17)
- III. ‘Flee Sexual Immorality’ and ‘Glorify God with your Bodies’ (4.18–7.40)
  - A. Negative Treatment: ‘Flee Sexual Immorality’ (and greed<sup>31</sup>) (4.18–6.20)
  - B. Positive Treatment: ‘Glorify God with Your Bodies’ (7.1–40)

29 B. S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5–7* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999) 69; cf. Hays, *1 Corinthians*, 86.

30 Once these comparable commands are recognized, it is also worth noticing that these are also the same two passages in which Paul cites the Corinthian slogan that ‘all things are lawful’, reinforcing the idea that they are parallel.

31 The main exception to this outline of the letter is 6.1–11, which seems to have nothing to do with sexual immorality. Interestingly, the only other specific vice from which to ‘flee’ (φεύγε[τε]) in the NT, apart from sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6) and idolatry (1 Cor. 10), is greed (1 Tim. 6.11; in context φιλαργυρία, the love of money; 6.10). Typically Jews and Christians added greed as a third member to the unholy triad of vices that rightly condemns the heathen. Polycarp *To the Philippians* 11.2 makes explicit the presupposition of this material, that greed was a typical sin of the Gentiles: ‘If a man does not avoid love of money . . . *he will be judged as one of the Gentiles*’. Cf. Philo *Virt.* 180–82, which states that the conversion of pagans from idolatry entails a new lifestyle, which is among other things ‘superior to the desire for money’. In 1 Corinthians greed (πλεονέκτης) is mentioned alongside sexual immorality and idolatry in each of this letter’s three vice lists (5.10, 11; 6.10) and it is likely that greed was a primary motivation for the lawsuit in 6.1–11.



- IV. 'Flee Idolatry' and 'Glorify God' in Your Worship (8.1–14.40)
  - A. Negative Treatment: 'Flee Idolatry' (Food Offered to Idols) (8.1–11.1)
  - B. Positive Treatment: 'Glorify God' in Your Worship (11.2–14.40)
- V. The Resurrection and Consummation (15.1–58)
- VI. Letter Closing (16.1–24)

### The Argument of 1 Corinthians

Having noticed that the four main elements of 1 Corinthians are (in order) wisdom, sexuality, worship and resurrection/consummation, it is noteworthy that similar patterns of thought appear elsewhere in Paul's letters in shorter compass. Taken together they shed light on the argument of 1 Corinthians. The texts which distill the logic of 1 Corinthians are Rom 1.21–28, 1 Thess 1.9–10 and Rom 15.5–16. If the first summarizes Paul's understanding of the dynamics of pagan sin, the second and third encapsulate his conception of the nature of Gentile conversion and his missionary agenda respectively.

According to Rom 1.21–28 the Gentile vices of idolatry and sexual immorality are rooted in the futility of Gentile thinking and the senselessness of Gentile hearts (v. 21): 'Claiming to be wise, they became fools' (v. 22). It was their lack of true wisdom (despite their claim to possess it) that led them to 'exchange the glory of the immortal God for images' of human or other creatures (v. 23), as a result of which, 'God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity', which is most characteristically seen in sexual immorality, especially homosexual behavior (vv. 24–28). Thus it is the lack of true wisdom that ultimately led to idolatry and sexual immorality. Presumably, true wisdom (1.22) would have led Gentiles to avoid idolatry and sexual immorality (1.23–28). To Paul's way of thinking, true wisdom (1 Cor 1–4; cf. Rom 1.22) will keep the Corinthians from sexual immorality (1 Cor 4.18–7.40; cf. Rom 1.24) and idolatry (1 Cor 8–14; cf. Rom 1.23).

According to Rom 1.21–28 this is all tied to the glory of God. The foolishness of the Gentiles is related to the fact that they 'neither glorified [God] as God nor gave thanks to him' (v. 21) and, as indicated above, their idolatry is described as an act of exchanging 'the glory of the immortal God for images' (v. 23). The proper glorification of God which should have been expected was replaced by idolatry and sexual immorality. In our understanding, Paul's imperatives to glorify God in concluding the sections on sexual immorality and idolatry in 1 Corinthians (6.18; 10.14) reflect a similar pattern of thought.

In 1 Thess 1.9–10 Paul describes the conversion of Thessalonian pagans in terms that also summarize our understanding of the structure of Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians. Paul says they 'turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead'.

Here Gentile conversion is understood to entail the rejection of idolatry<sup>32</sup> in favor of the service of the true and living God and his resurrected Son. Likewise, in 1 Corinthians Paul expects his converts to eschew idolatry (8.1–11.1), to worship the one, true God (11.2–14.40) and to live in the light of the reward and vindication guaranteed by the resurrection of Christ (1 Cor 15).

Paul's *raison d'être* is explained in Rom 15.5–16 using temple imagery: as 'a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles', Paul is to discharge his 'priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit' (15.16). Stated differently, Paul's purpose is that 'the Gentiles might glorify God' (15.9; cf. 15.6, 7). Romans 15.7 makes it clear that this will be achieved by sorting out certain ethical problems: 'Accept one another . . . in order to bring glory to God'. Four OT quotations reiterate the goal of Gentiles praising God along 'with his people'. The final quotation introduces the notion of hope, which Paul expands in a prayer in 15.13.

Paul's stated intentions and agenda in Romans 15 clarify the order in which he tackles the problems he confronts in 1 Corinthians. Both texts emphasize Christian unity, glorifying God and include a focus on a temple motif. In fact, the four main sections of 1 Corinthians correspond to the main movements in Romans 15: (1) Rom 15.5 = 1 Cor 1.10–4.17 – Paul calls for unity (cf. esp. Rom 15.6 and 1 Cor 1.10); (2) Rom 15.6, 7, 9 = 1 Cor 4.18–14.40 (cf. esp. the two commands to glorify God in 6.20 and 10.31 which summarize the two main subsections) – unity is to be established *in order that* ethical problems can be resolved and the Gentiles will 'glorify' God; and (3) Rom 15.12–13 = 1 Cor 15 (cf. esp. v. 19) – and hope in his Son.

Noticing this overall logic offers a corrective to the increasingly popular view of Mitchell that 1 Corinthians is basically about bringing the church to unity. Such a reading puts 'the cart before the horse'. Paul's big goal is not unity, but the sanctification of Gentile believers that they may glorify God. As Rom 15.5–6 show, unity is not the goal, but is the prerequisite for the Gentiles to 'glorify God with one mind and voice'. In 1 Corinthians Paul deals with Corinthian factionalism first in order to clear the way for this more important matter.

The chart below displays the patterns found in the three texts and their relevance to the argument of 1 Corinthians:

<sup>32</sup> Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities*, 93, points out that in 1 Thess 4.3–8, 'peoples who do not know God are described as sexually immoral and impure; by contrast, those called by God must be sanctified, by avoiding the sexual immorality (*porneia*) and impurity of such peoples'. Thus, according to 1 Thessalonians, those who convert to the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ must turn away from both idols (1.9–10) and sexual immorality (4.3–8) to worship him.

	<i>Rom 1.21–28</i>	<i>1 Thess 1.9–10</i>	<i>Rom 15.5–16</i>
1. <i>1 Cor 1.10–4.17</i>	Lack of wisdom [and failure to glorify God]		Paul calls for unity
2. <i>1 Cor 4.18–7.40</i>	leads to sexual immorality		in order that ethical problems can be
3a. <i>1 Cor 8.1–11.1</i>	and idolatry	Gentile converts go from idolatry	resolved so that the Gentile believers will
3b. <i>1 Cor 11.2–14.40</i>		to worship of the one true God	glorify God
4. <i>1 Cor 15.1–58</i>		and wait for their resurrected Lord	and hope in his Son

Having detected the main elements of the logic and structure of 1 Corinthians in relation to Paul's thought elsewhere in his letters, it remains for us to sketch the biblical-theological framework which informs his argument. The main features of this framework are the lordship of Christ, worldwide worship, the eschatological temple and the glory of God.

If Corinthian problems can be attributed to their cultural background, Paul's various responses may be ascribed to his understanding of Christ and the significance of his lordship; in almost every case Paul pits Christ against the prevailing culture. He appeals for unity in the name of Christ (1.10), who is the power and wisdom of God (2.23–24) and the foundation of the church (3.11). The church must be cleansed of the incestuous man because of Christ's sacrifice (5.7). To have relations with a prostitute is to violate Christ (6.15). Eating food sacrificed to idols must be avoided for the sake of one for whom Christ died (8.11) and in imitation of Christ (11.1). With respect to head coverings, he notes that Christ is the head of every man (11.3). The Lord's Supper must be celebrated by discerning 'the body' of Christ (11.29). Spiritual gifts are to be exercised in order to build up the body of Christ (12.27). Finally, the resurrection of believers is grounded in the resurrection of Christ (15.3–23). Throughout the letter 'Christ' appears 64 times, 'Lord' 66 times and 'Jesus' 26 times.<sup>33</sup>

In connection with this, the nature of the eschatological temple and the glory that God is to receive through worldwide worship are understood in the light of the kingdom God has established through his Son, the universal Lord. The expectation that universal glory and worship would be given to God is at the heart of the significance of the lordship of Jesus Christ, whose post-crucifixion exaltation is

33 R. B. Terry, 'Patterns of Discourse Structure in I Corinthians', *JOTT* 7/4 (1996) 1–32, also draws attention to the centrality of Christ in 1 Corinthians.

understood by Paul and other NT authors to inaugurate the long-awaited time of the universal and eternal kingdom of God which would result in every knee bowing and every tongue confessing that 'Jesus Christ is Lord, *to the glory of God the Father*' (Phil 2.11; cf. Rev 15.3–4). First Corinthians comes to a climax in ch. 15 with Paul's discussion of the resurrection as it relates to the ultimate triumph of Christ over all adversaries and the final transformation of our corruptible humanity into humanity that fully reflects God's glory. It is no surprise that Paul offers the resurrection as the decisive basis for his ethical instruction,<sup>34</sup> especially given the relationship between Christ's resurrection, his reign and God's ultimate glory (15.24–28).

In 1.2 Paul refers to the Corinthians as those 'who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints along with all those who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place – their Lord and ours'. Paul's statement that the Corinthians are united with all those who call on the name of the Lord 'in every place' evokes a significant scriptural tradition going back to a key theme in Deuteronomy, namely, the Lord's selection of one particular place where people would call on his name (understood to refer to Jerusalem). Repeated reference is made to 'the place which the Lord your God will choose to have people call upon his name' (cf. LXX Deut 12.11, 21, 26; 14.23–24; 16.2, 6, 11; 17.8, 10; 26.2). Rather than refer to that place, however, Paul says the Corinthians join those who call on the name of our Lord 'in every place (ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ)'. The expression is only found in the Pauline corpus (1 Cor 1.2; 2 Cor 2.14; 1 Thess 1.8; 1 Tim 2.8) and he uses it to refer to the worship of God which is spreading around the world through his ministry to the Gentiles.<sup>35</sup>

The expression echoes LXX Mal 1.11,<sup>36</sup> which (in a context of frustration over the way the Lord is being worshipped in Jerusalem) prophesies a future time when God would be worshipped by Gentiles 'in every place': 'From the rising of the sun until its setting my name will be glorified (τὸ ὄνομά μου δεδόξασται) among the Gentiles and in every place (ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ) incense is offered to my name and a pure offering, for my name is great among the Gentiles, says the Lord Almighty'.<sup>37</sup>

34 See O. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

35 Significantly, in context all four texts evince one or more of the following temple motifs: offerings, worship, the Spirit, holiness and prayer.

36 The influence of the text on the NT is suggested by the UBS<sup>4</sup> references to it in 2 Thess 1.12 and Rev 15.4 (note 'all nations') as also alluding to Mal 1.11, picking up 'the glorifying of God's name' language. That Paul knew and appreciated Malachi is clear from his description of the fiery judgment of God's temple in 1 Cor 3 which alludes to Mal 3.

37 P. Towner, 'The Pastoral Epistles', *NDBT* 330–6 (333). As A. E. Hill notes (*Malachi: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 25D; New York: Doubleday, 1998] 188) this perspective of Malachi is not an isolated thought: 'Like his earlier contemporaries Haggai (2:7) and Zechariah (8:22), Malachi calls upon his audience to recognize that the worship of Yahweh extends universally to the nations'.

Similarly, Hag 2.7 anticipates a time when the Gentiles will glorify God in his temple: 'all nations will come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts'. The echo of Mal 1.11 in 1 Cor 1.2 suggests the Corinthians are part of the fulfillment of God's plan to be worshipped among all the Gentiles, and it is Paul's ultimate purpose in writing to them to see them play their part in fulfilling this worldwide eschatological vision by glorifying God (see 6.20b and 10.31b). If Malachi's purpose and message was intended to help his audience come 'to terms, mentally, spiritually and ethically, with the non-appearance of the new eschatological beginning'<sup>38</sup> which had been expected with the return from exile, Paul's goal in 1 Corinthians is to get the Corinthians to come to terms, mentally, spiritually and ethically with its appearance.

Tob 14.5–7 looks forward to the mass conversion of the Gentiles accompanied by a clear rejection of idolatry on their part: 'All the nations of the world shall be converted and shall offer God true worship; all shall abandon their idols'. This would be the time when the Lord's name would be glorified in all the earth (Pss 57.11; 86.9; Isa 24.15; 42.10, 12; 66.18–19; Ezek 39.21; 43.2–5; Mic 5.4; Hab 2.14).

Paul's understanding that God would be glorified through Christ and his church is evident across the Pauline corpus and is one of the apostle's key pastoral and missiological motivations. He prays for the Thessalonian Christians that 'the name of the Lord Jesus might be glorified in you, and you in him' (2 Thess 1.12) and for the Philippians, that they might be loving, knowledgeable, discerning, pure, blameless and fruitful 'to the glory and praise of God' (Phil 1.9–11). The doxology of Gal 1.5 ('to whom be the glory forever and ever') indicates that God's role in providing redemption in Christ should result in eternal glory for him. The doxology in Eph 3.20–21 accords God 'glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever'. According to 2 Thess 1.10, the purpose of the Lord's return 'is to be glorified in his holy people'.

Such universal worship also required a reconceptualizing of the nature and role of the temple, one which was already developing in Second Temple Judaism<sup>39</sup> and which is reflected in rest of the New Testament as well.<sup>40</sup> Paul's understanding of the church as both the body of Christ (12.27: 'you are the body of Christ'; cf. 12.12–27) and the temple of the Spirit (3.16: 'you are the God's temple and God's Spirit dwells in you'; cf. 3.17; 6.19) is central to the ecclesiology of 1 Corinthians. As the temple of God, Paul finds it imperative that the Corinthians glorify God. After all, '[t]he purpose of the Old Testament temple . . . was to house

38 K. Koch, *The Prophets: The Babylonian and Persian Periods* (trans. M. Kohl; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 179 (mentioned in Hill, *Malachi*, 45 n. 4).

39 Cf. 1QS 8.5–10; 9.4–6.

40 Matt 26.61; 27.40; Mark 14.58; 15.29; John 2.19, 21; 1 Pet 2.5.

and show forth God's glory'<sup>41</sup> and all four OT 'temples' are filled with God's glory.<sup>42</sup>

### Conclusion

These observations and analysis contribute several things to the study of 1 Corinthians. A biblical/Jewish approach provides a better basis for appreciating the structure and coherence of Paul's response to Corinthian problems. The letter is not an ad hoc reply to a series of distinct problems treated randomly or even in the order in which they had come to Paul's attention. The order is most likely Paul's own, one to which he is drawn, perhaps instinctively, as the similar thought patterns evident in Rom 1.21–28, 15.5–16 and 1 Thess 1.9–10 attest. The argument of the letter reflects the biblical-theological framework which informs not only Paul's letters but also his life and ministry as the apostle to the Gentiles.

The approach we are advocating to this letter also does greater justice to the fundamentally Jewish character of Paul's response to the Corinthians. It is effectively an early Christian reformulation of the traditional Jewish approach to dealing with sexual immorality and idolatry along with expectations associated with the eschatological conversion of Gentiles. And while unity is clearly a significant issue, Paul's most fundamental concern is not with unity itself, but with the glory of God, that is, that the church in Corinth might reflect the ultimate goal, 'that God may be all in all' (15.28).

To summarise, in 1 Corinthians Paul tells the church of God in Corinth that they are part of the fulfillment of the OT expectation of worldwide worship of the God of Israel, and as God's eschatological temple they must act in a manner appropriate to their pure and holy status by shunning pagan vices and glorifying God as they reflect the lordship of Jesus Christ.

41 G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004) 252.

42 Cf. the tabernacle (Exod 40.34–35; Num 14.10; 16.42; cf. Exod 20.24; 1 Sam 4.21–22), Solomon's temple (2 Chron 7.1–3 [3x]), the rebuilt temple (Ezra 7.27; 8.36; cf. 1 Macc 15.9; 2 Macc 3.2; 1 Esd 8.25), the eschatological temple in Ezekiel (43.4–5). Likewise, the consummated temple in Revelation is associated with glory (Rev 15.8; 21.11, 23, 26).