

1 Corinthians: Secular Culture and Church Division

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Dave Mathewson analyzes the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians as a direct response to secular Corinthian culture infiltrating the early church. He highlights how worldly social practices—including patron-client competitive dynamics, leadership factionalism, tolerated sexual immorality, and class stratification during the Lord's Supper—undermined Christian unity. Mathewson demonstrates how Paul applies Old Testament frameworks and temple imagery to redefine the church as a holy community that must maintain purity and express gospel-centered unity. Ultimately, uncovering the first-century historical and cultural background of Corinth proves essential for accurately interpreting Paul's pastoral instructions.

Outline

I. Introduction and Historical Context of 1 Corinthians

A. Background in Acts 18

1. Paul's 18-month ministry establishing the church in Corinth
2. Corinth as capital of Achaia in modern-day Greece

B. Epistolary Context and Ongoing Correspondence

1. Canonical 1 Corinthians as part of a series of letters (technically the second letter)
2. Necessity of reconstructing historical problems from Paul's responses

C. Organizational Schemes of the Letter

1. By source of information (oral report in chs. 1–6 vs. written queries in chs. 7–16)
2. By Old Testament thematic framework and theological resolution

II. Cultural Infiltration of First-Century Corinthian Society

A. Secular Values Infiltrating the Church

1. Adoption of secular business, political, and social dynamics
2. Misalignment between worldly status and gospel values

B. Crisis in Leadership and Social Status

1. Patron-client relationships and socio-economic expectations
2. Influence of Sophists (sophos) competing for partisan followings

C. Greco-Roman Attitudes Toward Sexual Immorality

1. Permissive cultural environment regarding sexuality
2. Pagan religious celebrations and moral compromised backgrounds

III. Exegetical Analysis of Selected Passages

A. Chapters 1–3: Leadership Clamor and Division

1. Report from Chloe's people regarding quarrels and factions (Paul, Apollos, Cephas, Christ)
2. Secular patron/sophist competition vs. God's wisdom in a crucified Lord
3. Paul's refusal of Corinthian financial patronage to avoid obligation

B. Chapter 5: Tolerated Immorality and Church Discipline

1. Case of incest (man sleeping with stepmother) tolerated and boasted about by the church
2. Probable motivations (retaining family inheritance; deference to an influential patron)
3. Theological solution grounded in Old Testament (Leviticus 18, Deuteronomy, and church as holy temple)

C. Chapter 7: Marital and Celibacy Instructions

1. Response to written query ("it is good for a man not to touch a woman")
2. Misguided extreme asceticism/abstinence as an overreaction to Corinthian immorality
3. Balanced apostolic instructions for married, divorced, and single believers

D. Chapter 11: Liturgical Abuses at the Lord's Supper

1. Social stratification and division during communal worship meals
2. Wealthy members arriving early, eating full meals; poor members arriving late, humiliated with leftovers
3. Partaking in an "unworthy manner" defined as perpetuating social division rather than discerning Christ's unified body