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1 Corinthians and Work

Theology of Work Project

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Introduction to 1 Corinthians

No other letter in the New Testament gives us a more practical picture of applying the Christian faith to the day-to-day issues of life and work than 1 Corinthians. Topics such as career and calling, the lasting value of work, overcoming individual limitations, leadership and service, the development of skills and abilities (or “gifts”), fair wages, environmental stewardship, and the use of money and possessions are prominent in the letter. The unifying perspective on all these topics is love. Love is the motivation and purpose, means and the motivation, and the gift and the glory behind all work done in Christ.

THE CITY OF CORINTH (1 CORINTHIANS)

The Apostle Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth, which he founded on his second missionary journey (48-51 AD), is a treasure trove of practical theology for Christians facing everyday challenges. It provides Paul’s instruction to Christians grappling with real-life issues including conflicts of loyalty, class differences, conflicts between personal freedom and the common good, and the difficulty of leading a diverse group of people to accomplish a shared mission.

In Paul’s time, Corinth was the most important city in Greece. Sitting astride the isthmus that joins the Peloponnesian Peninsula to mainland Greece, Corinth controlled both the Saronic Gulf to the East and the Gulf of Corinth to the North. Merchants wanted to avoid the difficult, dangerous trip around the fingers of the Peloponnese, so a great deal of the goods flowing between Rome and the Western Empire, on the one hand, and the rich ports of the Eastern Mediterranean, on the other, was hauled across this isthmus. Almost all of it passed through Corinth, making it one of the Empire’s great commercial centers. Strabo, an older contemporary of Paul, noted that “Corinth is called ‘wealthy’ because of its commerce, since it is situated on the Isthmus and is master of two harbors, of which the one leads straight to Asia, and the other to Italy; and it makes easy the exchange of merchandise from both countries that are so far distant from each other.”^[1]

The city had something of a boomtown atmosphere during the middle of the First Century AD, as freed

slaves and veterans, merchants and tradesmen streamed into the city. Though what we might now call “upward mobility” was elusive in the ancient world, Corinth was one place where it might be possible, with a little luck and a lot of hard work, to establish oneself and enjoy a reasonably good life.^[2] This contributed to the unique ethos of Corinth, which viewed itself as prosperous and self-sufficient, a city whose core value was “entrepreneurial pragmatism in the pursuit of success.”^[3] Many cities in today’s world aspire to this very ethos.

THE CHURCH IN CORINTH AND PAUL'S LETTERS (1 CORINTHIANS)

Paul arrived in Corinth in the winter of 49/50 AD^[4] and lived there for a year and a half. While there he supported himself by working in tentmaking — or perhaps leatherworking^[5] (Acts 18:2), the trade he had learned as a boy — in the workshop of Aquila and Priscilla (see 1 Corinthians 4:12). He lays out his reasons for following this course in 1 Corinthians 9 (see below), even though he could have taken advantage of full-time support as a missionary from the start, as indeed he later does (Acts 18:4 and 2 Corinthians 11:9).

In any case, his Sabbath-day preaching in the synagogue soon bore fruit, and the church in Corinth was born. The church seems to have been made up of not more than a hundred people when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. Some were Jews, while most were Gentiles. They met in the houses of two or three wealthier members, but most belonged to the large underclass that populated all urban centers.^[6]

Paul continued to be keenly interested in the development of the church even after he left Corinth. Paul had written the congregation at least one letter prior to 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:9) in order to address a problem that had come up after his departure. Members of the house of Chloe, who may have had business interests to attend to in Ephesus, visited Paul there and reported that the church in Corinth was in danger of coming apart at the seams over various divisions of opinion (1:11). In the entrepreneurial Corinthian style, competing groups were creating parties around their favorite apostles in order to gain status for themselves (chs. 1-4). Many were up in arms due to serious differences over the sexual behavior and business ethics of some of their members (chs. 5-6). Then another group of representatives from the church arrived with a letter in hand (7:1, 16:17) querying Paul on a number of important issues, such as sex and marriage (ch. 7), the propriety of eating meat that had been previously offered to idols (chs. 8-10) and worship (chs. 11-14). Finally, Paul had also learned from one of these sources, or perhaps Apollos (see 16:12), that some in the Corinthian church were denying the future resurrection of believers (ch. 15).

These questions hardly grew out of academic discussions. The Corinthians wanted to know how as followers of Christ they should act in matters of daily life and work. Paul gives answers throughout 1 Corinthians, making it one of the most practical books of the New Testament.

All are called (1 Cor 1:1-3)

In the opening paragraph of 1 Corinthians, Paul lays out themes that he will address in more detail in the body of his letter. It is no coincidence that the concept of calling is front and center in the introduction. Paul states in the very first verse that he was “called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (1:1). A strong conviction that he was called directly by God pervades Paul’s letters (see e.g. Galatians 1:1) and is fundamental to his mission (see Acts 9:14-15). It lent him remarkable fortitude in the face of enormous challenges. Likewise, the Corinthian believers are “called” along with “all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2). We will soon see that the basis of our calling is not individual satisfaction, but community development. Paul doesn’t develop this point until later in the letter (see 7:17-24), but even at this juncture it is clear that he believes every believer is meant to pursue a calling designed for him or her by God.

Spiritual Resources Available (1 Cor 1:4-9)

According to the conventions of ancient letter writing, a greeting was followed by a section in which the author praises the recipient.^[7] In most of his letters, Paul modifies this literary form by offering thanksgiving rather than praise and by using a standard phrase much like we have here: “I give thanks to my God always for you...” (see 1:4 as well as Romans 1:8, Philippians 1:3, Colossians 1:3, 1 Thessalonians 1:2, and 2 Thessalonians 1:3). In this case, Paul expresses his thanks that the Corinthian believers have experienced the grace of God in Christ. This is more than some vague piety. Rather, Paul has something quite specific in mind. The believers in Corinth have been “enriched in [Christ]” (1 Cor. 1:5) so that they “are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:7). Paul specifically names two gifts, speech and knowledge, that the Corinthian church enjoyed in abundance.

For our purposes, it is especially important to note that Paul is convinced that the believers in Corinth have received the spiritual resources they need to fulfill their calling. God has called them, and he has given them gifts that will enable them to be “blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:8). The day of perfection has not arrived yet, whether at work or anywhere else. But Christians already have access to the gifts that will come to complete fruition on that day.

It is hard to imagine that every Corinthian Christian felt as if his or her work was a special occupation designed individually for them by God. Most of them were slaves or common laborers, as we will see. What Paul must mean is that whether or not each person’s occupation seems special, God gives the gifts needed to make everyone’s work contribute to God’s plan for the world. No matter how insignificant our work seems, no matter how much we long to have a different job, the work we do *now*

is important to God.

The Need for a Common Vision (1 Cor 1:10-17)

Paul states in thesis-like fashion what he is trying to accomplish by writing 1 Corinthians. [8] “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1 Cor. 1:10). The verb that he uses in this final phrase is a metaphor that connotes mending of human relationships. Thus, Paul is urging the Corinthians to overcome the factionalism that has damaged the unity of the church.

Modern western culture values diversity highly, so we are in danger of construing Paul’s injunctions negatively. He is not arguing for conformity of thought (as other passages make clear), but he understands quite clearly that a sense of common purpose and vision is essential. If there is continual strife and disagreement about basic values and convictions and no cohesion among its members, any organization is doomed to failure. Although Paul is writing to a church, we know he also thought Christians should contribute to the workings of society at large. “Be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to *be ready for every good work*” (Titus 3:1, emphasis added). Therefore we should seek common purpose not only in church, but also in the places we work. Our role as Christians is to do good work in unity and harmony with believers and nonbelievers both. This does not mean we acquiesce in immorality or injustice. It does mean that we develop good relationships, support co-workers, and care to do our work excellently. If we cannot in good conscience do our work wholeheartedly, we need to find someplace else to work, rather than grumble or shirk.

Friends in Low Places (1 Cor 1:18-31)

Paul reminds the congregation in Corinth that most of them do not come from the ranks of the privileged classes. “Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1 Cor. 1:26). But the effectiveness of the church did not depend on having people with all the connections, educations or fortunes. God accomplishes his purposes with ordinary people. We have already seen that the value of our work is based on God’s gifts, not on our credentials.

But Paul draws a further point. Because we are nobody special by nature, we can never treat other people as insignificant.

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world,

things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, *so that no one might boast in the presence of God.* (1 Cor. 1:27-29, emphasis added)

Since Paul's day, many Christians have attained positions of power, wealth and status. His words remind us that we insult God if we allow these things to make us arrogant, disrespectful or abusive towards people in lower-status positions. Many workplaces still accord special privileges to higher-ranking workers, bearing no relevance to the actual work at hand. Aside from pay differences — which are covered in the article **Pay* (CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE) at www.theologyofwork.org — high-status workers may enjoy fancier offices, first-class travel, executive dining rooms, reserved parking, better benefits packages, company-paid club memberships, residences, drivers, personal services and other perquisites. They may receive special deference — for example, being called “Mr.” or “Ms.” or “Professor,” when others in the organization are called by first names only. In some cases, special treatment may be appropriate, based on the nature of the work performed and organizational responsibilities. But in other cases, such privileges may create unwarranted gradations of human worth and dignity. Paul's point is that such distinctions have no place among the people of God. If we enjoy — or suffer — such distinctions at work, we might ask ourselves whether they contradict the equal dignity of persons in the presence of God, and if so, what we might do to remedy them.

It Takes All Sorts (1 Cor 3:1-9)

We noted above that the main problem in the Corinthian church was that of factionalism. Cliques were forming under the banner of his name versus the name of Apollos, another missionary to the Corinthian church. Paul will have none of this. He and Apollos are simply servants. Although they have different roles, neither of them is more valuable than the other. The planter (Paul) and the irrigator (Apollos) — to use an agricultural metaphor — are equally vital to the success of the harvest, and neither is responsible for the growth of the crop. That is entirely God's doing. The various workers have a common goal in mind (a bounteous harvest), but they have different tasks in line with their abilities and calling. All are necessary and no one can do all the necessary tasks.

Paul, in other words, is aware of the importance of diversification and specialization. In his famous 1958 essay, “I, Pencil,” economist Leonard Read followed the course of manufacture of a common pencil, making the point that no single person knows how to make one. It is actually the product of several sophisticated processes, only one of which a given individual can master. By the grace of God, different people are able to play different roles in the world's workplaces. But specialization at times leads to interpersonal or inter-departmental factionalism, poor lines of communication, and even personal vilification. If Christians believe what Paul says about the God-given nature of different roles, perhaps we can take the lead in bridging dysfunctional divides in our organizations. If we are able

simply to treat others with respect and value the work of people different from ourselves, we may be making important contributions to our workplaces.

An important application of this is the value of investing in worker development, whether our own or that of people around us. In Paul's letters, including 1 Corinthians, it sometimes seems that Paul never does anything himself (see, for example, 14-15) but instructs others how to do it. This is not arrogance or laziness, but mentoring. He would far rather invest in training effective workers and leaders than in calling all the shots himself. As we mature in serving Christ in our places of work, perhaps we will find ourselves doing more to equip others and less to make ourselves look good.

Do Good Work (1 Cor 3:10-17)

Paul introduces the metaphor of a building under construction in order to make a new point — do good work. This point is so important to understanding the value of work that it is worth including the passage in its entirety here.

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Cor. 3:10-15)

This may be the most direct statement of the eternal value of earthly work in the entire scripture. The work we do on earth — to the extent we do it according to the ways of Christ — survives into eternity. Paul is speaking specifically of the work done by the community of the church, which he likens to a temple. Paul compares himself to a “skilled master builder” who has laid the foundation, which is, of course, Christ himself. Others build on top of this foundation, and each one is responsible for his own work. Paul likens good work to gold, silver and precious stones, and shabby work to wood, hay, and straw. Though some have tried to assign specific meanings to each of these materials, it is more likely that the difference simply that some materials have the ability to withstand testing by fire while others do not.

Paul is not making any judgment about any individual's salvation, for even if anyone's work fails the test, "the builder will be saved." This passage is not about the relationship between a believer's "good works" and his heavenly reward, though it has often been read in that way. Instead, Paul is concerned with the church as a whole and how its leaders work within the church. If they contribute to the unity of the church, they will be commended. If, however, their ministry results in strife and factionalism, they are actually provoking God's wrath, because he passionately protects his living temple from those who would destroy it (vv. 16-17).

Although Paul is writing about the work of building a Christian community, his words apply to all kinds of work. As we have seen, Paul regards Christian work to include the work believers do under secular authority as well as in the church. Whatever our work, it will be evaluated impartially by God. The final assize will be better than any performance review, since God judges with perfect justice — unlike human bosses, however just or unjust they may be — and he is able to factor in our intent, our limitations, our motives, our compassion and his mercy. God has called all believers to work under whatever circumstances they find themselves, and has given us specific gifts to fulfill that calling. He expects us to use them responsibly for his purposes, and he will inspect our work. And to the degree that our work is done in excellence, by his gifts and grace, it will become part of God's eternal kingdom. That should motivate us — even more than our employer's approval or our paycheck — to do as good a job as we possibly can.

CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE: This topic is explored in depth in the article **The Meaning and Value of Work* at www.theologyofwork.org.

Leadership as Service (1 Cor 4:1-4)

In this passage, Paul offers a definitive statement of what it means to be a leader: "Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries" (1 Cor. 4:1). "Us" refers to the apostolic leaders through whom the Corinthians had come to faith and to whom the various factions in the church claimed allegiance (1 Cor. 4:6). Paul uses two words in this verse to elaborate what he means. The first, *hypēretēs* ("servants"), denotes an attendant, a servant who waits on or assists someone. In this sense, a leader attends personally to the needs of the people he or she leads. The leader is not exalted, but humbled, by accepting leadership. The job requires patience, personal engagement, and individual attention to the needs of followers. The second is *oikonomos* ("stewards"), which describes a servant or slave who manages the affairs of a household or estate. The chief distinction in this position is trust. The steward is trusted to manage the affairs of the household for the benefit of the owner. Likewise, the leader is trusted to manage the group for the benefit of all its members, rather than the leader's personal benefit. This quality is explicitly ascribed to Timothy (2 Corinthians 4:17), Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7), Paul (1 Timothy 1:12), Antipas (Revelation 2:13) and, above all, Christ

(2 Timothy 2:13; Hebrews 2:17). These are the kinds of people God relies on to carry out his plan for his kingdom.

Modern workplaces often set up systems to reward leaders for using their teams to accomplish the organization's objectives. This is probably a wise practice, unless it encourages leaders to attain such rewards at the expense of the people they lead. Leaders are indeed responsible to accomplish — or better yet, exceed — the work their teams are assigned to do. But it is not legitimate to sacrifice the needs of the group in order to obtain the leader's personal rewards. Instead, leaders are called to accomplish the group's goals *by meeting the needs* of the group. This topic is discussed in depth in the article **Leadership* (CONTENT NOT YET AVAILABLE) at www.theologyofwork.org.

Working with Nonbelievers (1 Cor 5:9-10)

Paul introduces the question of working with nonbelievers in chapter 5, a question he will explore more fully in chapter 10 and ultimately in 2 Corinthians chapter 6 (see "[Working with Nonbelievers](#)" in [2 Corinthians at Work](#) at www.theologyofwork.org). At this point, he says simply that Christians are not called to withdraw from the world because of fears about ethics. "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons — not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world" (1 Cor. 5:9-10). By mentioning the greedy, robbers, and idolaters, he explicitly indicates he is including the work world in his instructions. Although we are to avoid immorality ourselves, and we are not to associate with immoral *Christians*, Paul expects us to work with nonbelievers, even those who do not observe God's ethical principles. Needless to say, this is a difficult proposition, although he defers getting into specifics until chapter 10. The point he makes here is simply that Christians are forbidden from trying to create some kind of Christian-only economy and leaving the world to fend for itself. Instead, we are called to take our place in the work of the world alongside the people of the world.

Bloom Where You are Planted (1 Cor 7:20-24)

In the middle of a chapter in 1 Corinthians that deals primarily with issues relating to marriage and singleness, Paul makes an important statement (1 Corinthians 7:20-24) about calling and work. Other things being equal, believers should remain in the life situation in which they found themselves when they were converted (7:20). The specific question that Paul is dealing with does not directly impinge upon most people in the Western world, though it is of critical importance in many parts of the globe today. What should a believer who is a slave do if he or she has the chance to gain freedom?

Slavery in the ancient world was a complex phenomenon that is by no means identical to its modern manifestations—whether in the pre-civil-war American South, or in debt bondage in contemporary

South Asia, or in sex trafficking in virtually every country on earth. Certainly, it was equally heinous in many cases, but some slaves, particularly the household slaves that Paul probably has in mind here, were better off, at least economically, than many free people. Many educated people, including doctors and accountants, actually chose slavery for precisely that reason. Thus, for Paul, it was a genuinely open question whether slavery or freedom would be the better lot in any given situation. Modern forms of slavery, on the other hand, always severely diminish the lives of those enslaved.

Paul's question then is not whether slavery should be abolished, but whether slaves should seek to become free. It is very difficult to determine the precise nature of Paul's instruction here because the Greek of 1 Corinthians 7:21 is ambiguous, so much so that it is open to two very divergent interpretations. As the NRSV and a number of commentators understand it, it should be rendered as follows: "Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever." Equally possible (and more likely, in our opinion), however, is the sense given in the NIV, NASB, and KJV, which is, "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you — although if you can gain your freedom, do so" (NIV). Whatever Paul's advice, his underlying belief is that, compared to the difference between being in Christ and not in Christ, the difference between being a slave and a free person is relatively minor. "For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ" (7:22). Thus, if there are no compelling reasons to change your status, it is probably best to remain in the situation in which you were called.

[Understanding God's call on our lives \(Click to listen\)](#)

Paul's teaching here has important application for the workplace. While we may feel that getting the right job is the most important factor in serving God or experiencing the life he intends for us, God is much more concerned that we make the most of every job we have over the course of our lives. In a given instance, there may be good reasons to change jobs or even professions. Fine, go ahead and do so. Yet any morally legitimate job can fulfill God's calling, so don't make finding your life's work *into* your life's work. There is no hierarchy of more godly and less godly professions. Certainly this cautions us against believing that God calls the most serious Christians into church jobs.

For an in-depth discussion of this topic, see the article [Vocation Overview](#) at www.theologyofwork.org.

Maintain the Proper Perspective (1 Cor 7:29-31)

Paul addresses the question of whether the promised return of the Lord implies that Christians should abandon ordinary daily life, including work.

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on...let those who buy [be] as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. (1 Cor. 7:29-31)

Apparently some believers were neglecting family duties and ceased working, in the same way you might neglect to sweep the floor before moving to a new house. Paul had previously dealt with this situation in the church in Thessalonica and given unambiguous instructions.

Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12)

Paul's logic will be easier to understand if we recognize that verse 29 does not indicate merely that "the time is short" in the sense that Jesus' second coming is almost here. Paul uses a verb here that describes how an object is pushed together (*synestalmenos*), so that it becomes shorter or smaller as a whole. "Time has been compressed" might be a better translation, as suggested by the NASB rendering, "Time has been shortened." What Paul apparently means is that since Christ has come, the end of the vast expanse of time has at last become visible. "The future outcome of this world has become crystal clear," as scholar David E. Garland puts it.^[9] Verse 31 explains that "the present form of this world is passing away." The "present form" has the sense of "the way things are" in our fallen world of damaged social and economic relationships. Paul wants his readers to understand that Christ's coming has already effected a change in the very fabric of life. The values and aspirations that are simply taken for granted in the present way of doing things are no longer operative for believers.

The proper response to the compression of time is not to cease working, but to work differently. The old attitudes towards everyday life and its affairs must be replaced. This brings us back to the paradoxical statements in 1 Corinthians 7:29-31. We should buy, yet be as though we have no possessions. We should deal with the world as though not dealing with the world as we know it. That is, we may make use of the things this world has to offer, but we shouldn't accept the world's values and principles when they get in the way of God's kingdom. The things we buy, we employ for the good of others instead of holding tightly to them. When we bargain in the market, we seek the good of the person we buy from, not just our own interests. In other words, Paul is calling believers to "a radically new understanding of their relationship to the world."^[10]

Our old attitude is that we work to make life more comfortable and satisfying for ourselves and those

close to us. We seek to gather things into our possession that we think will bring us status, security and advantage over others. We compartmentalize worship of our gods first, then attention to our marriage second, then work third, and then civic engagement fourth, if we have any time and energy left. The new attitude is that we work to benefit ourselves, those close to us, *and all those Jesus worked and died for*. We seek to release the things in our possession for use where they will make the world more as God desires it. We integrate our lives of worship, family, work, and society and seek to invest in — rather than shuffle around — physical, intellectual, cultural, moral and spiritual capital. In this we emulate the forefather of the people of God, Abraham, to whom God said, “I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2).

Everyone Gets Their Fair Share (1 Cor 9:7-10)

In chapter nine, Paul explains why he initially chose not to accept direct financial support from the Corinthian church even though he had a right to it. He begins by asserting the right of workers, including apostles, to receive wages for their work. We serve the Lord in our work, and the Lord intends that we draw sustenance from it in return. Paul gives three examples from daily life that illustrate this point. Soldiers, vintners, and shepherds all derive economic benefit for their labors. Paul, however, rarely appeals to convention alone to make his case, so he quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 (“you shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain”) in support of his argument. If even animals deserve a share of the fruits of their labor, then surely any person who participates in bringing about some benefit should share in that benefit.

This text has clear implications for the workplace, especially for employers. Workers deserve a fair wage. In fact, the Bible threatens employers with dire consequences if they deny their employees just compensation (Leviticus 19:13, Deuteronomy 24:14, James 5:7). Paul knows that a variety of factors affect the determination of a fair wage, and he does not try to prescribe a figure or formula. Likewise, the complexities of supply and demand, regulation and unionization, wages and benefits, and power and flexibility in today’s labor markets are beyond the scope of this article. But the principle is not. Those who employ human labor cannot neglect the needs of those whose work they employ.

Nonetheless, Paul chooses not to make use of his right to receive wages for his work as an apostle. Why? Because in his case, given the sensitivities in the church in Corinth, to do so might “put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.” As it happens, God has made it possible for him to earn a living there by introducing him to fellow tentmakers (or leatherworkers), Priscilla and Aquila, who live in Corinth (Acts 18:1-3, Romans 16:3). Paul doesn’t expect that God will arrange things so that all church workers can afford to work for free. But in this case, God did, and Paul accepts God’s provision with thanks. The point is that only the worker has the right to offer to work without fair remuneration. The employer has no right to demand it.

God's Glory is the Ultimate Goal (1 Cor 8 & 10)

In the course of an extended argument beginning in chapter 8 on an issue of critical importance to believers in Corinth — the propriety of eating meat that had previously been offered to idols — Paul articulates a broad principle concerning the use of the earth's resources. He says, quoting Psalm 24:1, "The earth and its fullness are the Lord's" (1 Cor. 10:26). That is, because everything comes from God, any food may be eaten irrespective of its previous use for pagan cultic purposes. (In a Roman city, much of the meat sold in the market would have been offered to idols in the course of its preparation.

[11]) There are two aspects of this principle that apply to work.

First, we may extend Paul's logic to conclude that believers may use all that the earth produces, including food, clothing, manufactured goods, and energy. However, Paul sets a sharp limit to this use. If our use harms another person, then we should refrain. In the context of a dinner party at which meat offered to idols is the issue, another person's conscience may be the reason we need to refrain from eating it. If the context is worker safety, resource scarcity or environmental degradation, then the well being of today's workers, the access to resources of today's poor, and the living conditions of tomorrow's population may be the reasons we refrain from consuming certain items. Since God is the owner of the earth and its fullness, the use we make of the earth must be in line with his purposes.

Second, we are expected to engage in commerce with nonbelievers, as we have already seen from 1 Corinthians 5:9-10. If Christians were only buying meat from Christian butchers, or even from Jews, then of course there would have been no reason to worry whether it had been offered to idols. But Paul asserts that believers are to engage in commerce with society at large. (The concerns in chapter 8 also assume that Christians will engage in social relationships with nonbelievers, although that is not our topic here.) Christians are not called to withdraw from society, but to engage society, including society's places of work. As noted earlier, Paul discusses the limits to this engagement in 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 (see "[Working with Nonbelievers](#)" in *2 Corinthians at Work* at www.theologyofwork.org).

"Therefore, whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God," says Paul (1 Cor. 10:31). This verse by no means legitimates every conceivable activity. It should not be construed to mean that absolutely anything could be done in a way that brings glory to God. Paul's point is that we have to discern whether our actions — including work — are consistent with God's purposes in the world. The criterion is not whether we associate with nonbelievers, whether we use materials that could be used for ill by others, whether we deal with people who are not friends with God, but whether the work we do contributes to God's purposes. If so, then whatever we do will indeed be done for the glory of God.

The upshot is that all vocations that add genuine value to God's created world in a way that benefits

humanity are true callings that bring God glory. The farmer and grocery clerk, the manufacturer and the emissions regulator, the parent and the teacher, the voter and the governor can enjoy the satisfaction of serving in God's plan for his creation.

Gifted Communities (1 Cor 12:1-14:40)

The use of what has come to be called "spiritual gifts" (12:1) seems to have caused much contention in the church of Corinth. It seems that the gift of tongues (i.e. Spirit-led ecstatic utterances), in particular, was being used to accentuate status differences in the church, with those who practiced this gift claiming to be more spiritual than those who didn't (see 12:1-3, 13:1, 14:1-25).^[12] In countering, Paul articulates a broad understanding of the gifts of God's spirit that has major applications to work.

The first thing to observe is that the term "spiritual gifts" is too narrow to describe what Paul is talking about. They are "spiritual" in the broad sense of originating from God's spirit, not in the narrow sense of being disembodied or paranormal. And "gift" is only one of a number of terms that Paul uses for the phenomenon he has in mind. In chapter 12 alone, he calls the various gifts "services" (12:5), "activities" (12:6), "manifestations" (12:7), "deeds," "forms" and "kinds" (12:28). The exclusive use of the term "spiritual gift" to refer to what Paul also calls, "manifestation of God's spirit for the common good" or "kind of service" tends to skew our thinking.^[13] It suggests that God's spirit supersedes or ignores the "natural" skills and abilities God has given us. It implies that the recipient of the "gift" is its intended beneficiary. It makes us think that worship, rather than service, is the primary purpose of the Spirit's working. All of these are false assumptions, according to 1 Corinthians. The Holy Spirit does not dispense with our bodily abilities, but honors and employs them (12:14-26). The community or organization, not merely the individual, benefits (12:7). The purpose is to build up the community (14:3-5) and serve outsiders (14:23-25), not merely to improve the quality of worship. "Giftings" might be a better term to use, since it carries these important connotations better.

Second, Paul seems to be providing a number of examples rather than an exhaustive list. Paul also lists gifts of God in Romans 12:6-8, Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Peter 4:10-11, and the differences among the lists suggest that they are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Among them there is no standard list or even a standard way of referring to the various ways the gifts are given. Contrary to much popular literature on the subject, then, it is impossible to compile a definitive list of *the* spiritual gifts. They exhibit a striking variety. Some are what we would call "supernatural" (speaking in unknown languages), while others seem to be natural abilities (leadership) or even personality traits (mercy). As we have seen, Paul tells us to "do everything for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31), and here he lists a few of the amazing things God will give us the ability to do.

Paul has the church in mind here (14:4, 12), and some Christians suppose this passage to mean that the

Spirit gives gifts *only* for use inside the church. However, Paul gives no reason to suppose that these gifts are limited to the confines of the church. God’s kingdom encompasses the whole world, not just the institutions of the church. Believers can and should exercise their giftings in every setting, including the workplace. Many of the giftings named here, such as leadership, service, and discernment, will be of immediate benefit in the workplace. Others will no doubt be given to us as needed to serve God’s purposes in whatever work we do. We should by all means develop the giftings we have been given and use them for the common good in every sphere of life.

In fact, the most important question is not who, where, what, or how we exercise the giftings of God’s spirit. The most important question is why we employ the gifts. And the answer is, “for love.” Gifts, talents and abilities — coming as they do from God — are sources of excellence in our work. But as he begins to discuss the importance of love, Paul says, “I will show you a still more excellent way” (12:31), “for the greatest of these is love” (13:13). If I exercise every wondrous gifting of God’s spirit “but do not have love,” says Paul, “I am nothing (13:2). Chapter 13 is often read at weddings, but it is actually a perfect manifesto for the workplace.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (13:4-7)

If Christians would exhibit these kinds of love in our places of work, how much more productive and enriching would work be for everyone? How much glory would it bring our Lord? How much closer would we come to God’s fulfillment of our prayer, “thy kingdom come on earth”?

Our Work is Not in Vain (1 Cor 15:58)

Paul conducts a lengthy discussion of the resurrection in chapter 15. He applies his conclusions directly to work. “[Excel] in the work in the Lord because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58). How does a correct understanding of the resurrection — that believers will be raised bodily — ground the conclusion that our labor for the Lord is of lasting significance (“not in vain”)?

[Find out what God's Word says about vocation and faith \(Click to listen\)](#)

First of all, we must recognize that if life in the fallen world around us were all there were to life, our labor would be in vain (1 Cor. 15:14-19). Paul’s use of the word “vain” brings to mind Ecclesiastes’ extended meditation on the vanity of work under the conditions of the fall. (See [Ecclesiastes and Work](#) at www.theologyofwork.org.) Even if there is life beyond the fallen state of the present world, our work

would be in vain if the new world were completely disconnected from the present one. At most, it would launch us (and perhaps others) into the new world. But we have already seen that work done according to God's ways survives into eternity (1 Cor. 3:10-15). In the second half of chapter 15, Paul develops this matter further by stressing a fundamental continuity between pre- and post-resurrection bodily existence, in spite of vast differences in their respective substances. "This perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:53). Our soul does not change out the old body into a new body — as if donning a new suit of clothes — but our present body "puts on immortality." The old continues into the new, though radically transformed. It is precisely this continuity that lends meaning to our present existence and guarantees that our labor for God is of lasting value.^[14]

We Share Our Resources with Those in Hardship (1 Cor 16:1-3)

One ongoing project that Paul pursued throughout his missionary journeys was that of collecting money for congregations in Judea that were suffering economic hardship.^[15] He mentions this collection not only here, but also in Galatians 2:10, and he explains the theological rationale for it more thoroughly in Romans 15:25-31 and 2 Corinthians 8-9. For our purposes, it is important to note that, according to Paul, part of what a believer earns should be given for the benefit of those who cannot provide adequately for themselves. For Paul, one of the essential functions of the church is to take care of its world-wide members' needs. The Old Testament prescribed both fixed tithes and free-will offerings,^[16] which together supported the operations of the temple, the maintenance of the state, and the relief of the poor. But this system had ceased with the demise of the Jewish kingdoms. Paul's collection for the poor in Judea essentially assumes for the church the relief aspect once provided by the Old Testament tithes and offerings.

The New Testament nowhere affirms certain fixed percentages, but Paul encourages generosity (see 2 Corinthians 8-9), which would hardly mean less than Old Testament levels. Over the next several centuries, as the church grew, its role as a social service provider became an essential element of society, outlasting even the Roman Empire.^[17] Whatever the amount given, believers are expected to determine it ahead of time as a part of their budget and bring their offerings regularly to the weekly gatherings of the congregation. In other words, it takes a sustained lifestyle change to reach this level of generosity. We are not talking about pocket change.

These principles demand renewed consideration in our time. Governments have displaced the church as the prime providers of social welfare, but are there some forms of service that God equips Christians to do uniquely well? Could Christians' work, investment, and other economic activity be a means of serving those facing economic hardship? In Paul's day, there was limited scope for Christians to start businesses, engage in trade, or provide training and education, but today those could be means of

creating jobs or providing for economically disadvantaged people. Is the purpose of giving merely to bind the church more closely together around the world (certainly one of Paul's objectives), or also to care for our neighbors? Could it be that today God calls believers to give money *and* to conduct business, government, education, and every other form of work as a means of taking care of people in hardship?

These questions are explored in depth in the article [Provision and Wealth](http://www.theologyofwork.org) at www.theologyofwork.org.

Summary to 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians has much to contribute to a biblical understanding of work. Above all, it establishes a healthy sense of calling to every legitimate kind of work. In his opening words, Paul stresses that God has called both him and the Corinthian believers to follow Christ. God provides every believer with spiritual resources and concrete giftings for the service of others. Our effectiveness does not depend on our own merits, but on God's power. Depending on his power, we can and must seek to do good work. God leads us to a common vision and purpose in our work, which requires a diverse array of people working in a wide variety of jobs to accomplish. Leaders are needed to bring this diversity and variety into effective focus.

Leaders in God's kingdom are servants of those they lead, responsible for accomplishing their groups' tasks while at the same time meeting their needs. Whatever our position, it is more important to work each day according to God's purposes than to spend all our time and energy looking for the perfect job. Because we know Christ will return to fulfill God's restoration of the world to his original intent, we have the confidence to work diligently towards Christ's coming kingdom. When we work according to our abilities, God rewards our work with a fair share of the fruits of our labor. Christians are called to standards of fair wages and fair work.

Our ultimate goal is God's kingdom and his glory. This gives us freedom to use the resources of the world, but we must steward them for the benefit of all people, including future generations. In fact, we should not even think in terms of balancing the needs of one individual verses another, but in terms of building up communities of mutual support and service. Love is the mainspring of God's kingdom, and when we work out of love for the people Christ worked and died for, our work is not in vain. It has eternal significance and survives along with us into the new world of God's kingdom fulfilled. In the meantime, we take extra care to use the resources at our disposal to care for those in need.

Key Verses and Themes in 1 Corinthians

<p>1 Cor. 1:1-2 Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.</p>	<p>Every believer has a unique calling.</p>
<p>1 Cor. 1:4-7 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind — just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you — so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.</p>	<p>God gives believers the spiritual resources they need to fulfill their calling.</p>
<p>1 Cor. 1:10 Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.</p>	<p>Unity of vision is essential to obtain the goal.</p>
<p>1 Cor. 1:17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.</p>	<p>We should focus on the things we have been called to do.</p>
<p>1 Cor. 1:26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.</p>	<p>Called and gifted people come from all sorts of backgrounds.</p>
<p>1 Cor. 2:1-5 When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.</p>	<p>Image is by no means everything; content matters.</p>

<p>1 Cor. 3:4-9 For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.</p>	<p>Everyone has an important role to play in attaining the goal, and no one can take all the credit for doing so.</p>
<p>1 Cor. 3:10-15 According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.</p>	<p>Everyone is responsible before God for his or her own work.</p>
<p>1 Cor. 4:1-2 Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.</p>	<p>Faithfulness is a quality of supreme importance.</p>
<p>1 Cor. 7:20-24 Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever. For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters. In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God.</p>	<p>Generally speaking, believers do not need to change jobs to please God.</p>

<p>1 Cor. 7:29-31 I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.</p>	<p>Believers may use the things the world has to offer, but not hang their hearts on them.</p>
<p>1 Cor. 9:7-10 Who at any time pays the expenses for doing military service? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not get any of its milk? Do I say this on human authority? Does not the law also say the same? For it is written in the law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Or does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was indeed written for our sake, for whoever plows should plow in hope and whoever threshes should thresh in hope of a share in the crop.</p>	<p>Everyone who participates in the creation of wealth deserves a fair share of that wealth.</p>
<p>1 Cor. 10:26, 31 For “the earth and its fullness are the Lord’s”... So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.</p>	<p>All legitimate work should have God’s glory as its goal.</p>
<p>1 Cor. 12:4-11 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.</p>	<p>Every believer is gifted by God in concrete ways to be of service to others</p>
<p>1 Cor. 15:58 Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.</p>	<p>Because of the hope of resurrection, our work in this life has lasting value.</p>

1 Cor. 16:1-3 Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem.

Believers should use their resources to take care of brothers and sisters in economic [hardship](#).

ENDNOTES

- [1] Strabo, *Geographica* 8.6.20.
- [2] Donald Engels, *Roman Corinth: An Alternative Model for the Classical City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 49.
- [3] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 4.
- [4] The discovery of the so-called Gallio Inscription in Delphi, which establishes that Gallio was appointed proconsul of the province of Achaia for a one-year term beginning in July of 51 AD, allows us to date Paul's sojourn in Corinth with extraordinary precision. We know from Acts 18:12 that Paul appeared before Gallio in Corinth, and the circumstances of that meeting make it likely that it occurred at the beginning of Gallio's term and toward the end of Paul's one and a half year mission there.
- [5] Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 21-22.
- [6] Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 51-73.
- [7] Peter T. O'Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul*, NovTSup 49 (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 11.
- [8] Mitchell, *Paul*, 1, 66-67.

- [9] David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 329.
- [10] Fee, *First Corinthians*, 336.
- [11] Hans Conzelman, *1 Corinthians*, Hermeneia, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 176, incl. fn. 11-13.
- [12] On the implicit status claims attendant upon speaking in tongues, see Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 87-92.
- [13] For a scholarly discussion of the problems involving the term “spiritual gifts,” see Kenneth Berding, “Confusing Word and Concept in ‘Spiritual Gifts’: Have We Forgotten James Barr’s Exhortations?”, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (2000), 37-51.
- [14] N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, COQG 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2003), 359-360.
- [15] For an overview, see Scot McKnight, “Collection for the Saints” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, et al. (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 143-147.
- [16] See E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE - 66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 146-169.
- [17] Jeannine E. Olson, *Calvin and Social Welfare* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1989), 18.