

## **Unpacking Paul's Wisdom: Applying Corinthian Solutions to Today's Church Dilemmas**

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### **Abstract:**

Contemporary churches continue to wrestle with division, moral failure, spiritual elitism, and leadership scandals—struggles that mirror those of the first-century Corinthian community. This study explores how Paul's instructions in *1 Corinthians* offer enduring and practical wisdom for today's ecclesial dilemmas. While much scholarship emphasizes Paul's theology, fewer studies apply his counsel directly to modern crises such as congregational splits, misuse of spiritual gifts, and the erosion of trust in leadership. Employing a qualitative historical-grammatical approach supported by biblical commentaries and concordances, this paper situates Paul's message within its socio-cultural context and identifies its relevance for contemporary practice. The findings reveal four central contributions: unity in diversity as an antidote to factionalism, the equitable and orderly exercise of spiritual gifts, love as the supreme virtue of authentic community, and servant leadership as a safeguard against authoritarianism. These insights remain transferable across denominational boundaries and provide a framework for cultivating healthier congregations. Yet interpretive challenges persist, as modern contexts differ significantly from Corinth's urban Greco-Roman milieu. Nevertheless, Paul's theology continues to speak powerfully into situations of fragmentation and mistrust. This study advances Pauline scholarship by bridging the gap between exegesis and pastoral praxis, offering concrete, biblically grounded strategies for renewal in contemporary Christian communities.

### **Contribution:**

This study contributes to Pauline scholarship by bridging exegetical theology with practical ecclesiology, demonstrating how Paul's teachings on unity, love, and servant leadership can guide the renewal of contemporary church structures. It also offers a contextual framework that integrates biblical interpretation with sociocultural realities, enabling churches to translate Pauline wisdom into sustainable models of accountability, inclusivity, and collaboration.

**Keywords:** Paul's epistles; church unity; spiritual gifts; leadership; contemporary application

## INTRODUCTION

Churches in the twenty-first century continue to wrestle with dilemmas that undermine both their unity and their public witness. Leadership scandals, denominational splits, misuse of spiritual gifts, and widespread moral compromise mirror the very challenges that confronted the Corinthian church nearly two millennia ago (1 Cor. 1:10–17; 5:1–2; 12–14). Despite a vast body of exegetical and theological scholarship on Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians,<sup>123</sup> less attention has been given to its direct application as a practical framework for addressing contemporary crises such as the collapse of trust in church leadership, prosperity-gospel abuses, and the fragmentation of denominations in Africa and beyond.<sup>45</sup> This gap underscores the need to re-engage Paul's counsel for modern ecclesial renewal.

The significance of this study lies in bridging Pauline exegesis with pressing pastoral and organisational concerns. In an age marked by sectarianism, consumer-driven spirituality, and rising disillusionment with religious institutions, Paul's vision of unity, love, and servant leadership provides a countercultural paradigm.<sup>67</sup> By situating Paul's message within Corinth's socio-cultural context and aligning it with present-day realities, this research contributes both to biblical scholarship and to practical theology, offering strategies for fostering healthier, Christ-centred congregations.

Accordingly, the study pursues three objectives: (1) to identify parallels between the dilemmas of the Corinthian church and those of contemporary Christian communities; (2) to evaluate Paul's instructions on unity, gifts, love, and leadership as enduring resources for ecclesial renewal; and (3) to examine the interpretive challenges involved in applying first-century counsel to twenty-first-century practice. These objectives frame the following research questions: (a) What parallels exist between

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The first epistle to the Corinthians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> D. E. Garland, *First Corinthians*. Vol. 1. (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2023), 603.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen C. Barton and Andrew J. Byers, *One God, One People: Oneness and Unity in Early Christianity (Resources for Biblical Study 104)* (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2023), 237.

<sup>4</sup> Michael W Austin, *Humility: Rediscovering the Way of Love and Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Graham Cray, *On Mission with Jesus: Changing the default setting of the church* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Edward D. Andrews, *Understanding Biblical Words: A Guide to Sound Interpretation* (London: Christian Publishing House, 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen C. Barton and Andrew J. Byers, *One God, One People: Oneness and Unity in Early Christianity (Resources for Biblical Study 104)*, 237.

Corinthian and contemporary church dilemmas? (b) In what ways can Paul's instructions on unity, gifts, love, and leadership be applied today? (c) What are the limitations and contextual challenges of contextualising Pauline wisdom for modern churches?

The First Epistle to the Corinthians was written to a church embedded in a cosmopolitan and morally permissive city. Corinth's cultural diversity, philosophical pluralism, and social stratification shaped a congregation marked by divisions, moral laxity, elitism, and disputes over authority.<sup>89</sup> Paul's epistle addressed these challenges not as isolated problems but as interconnected symptoms of a deeper ecclesial crisis. By critically re-reading this background, the study frames Corinth as a mirror through which modern churches—facing leadership failures, ethical scandals, and sectarian rivalries—can discern both their weaknesses and the resources needed for renewal.

## Context

The city of Corinth in the first century was a wealthy, cosmopolitan hub, marked by cultural diversity, economic prosperity, and moral permissiveness. Its social fabric was shaped by patron–client networks, class stratification, and gender hierarchies that inevitably influenced the life of the church.<sup>1011</sup> The congregation reflected this pluralism, comprising Jews and Gentiles from varied socioeconomic and philosophical backgrounds. These dynamics contributed to the tensions Paul addressed in his First Epistle.

Factionalism was one of the most visible symptoms of these pressures. Believers aligned themselves with different leaders—Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or Christ (1 Cor. 1:10–13)—mirroring the Corinthian culture of loyalty to rhetoricians and philosophers. Yet division was only one aspect of the crisis. The church also struggled with moral laxity, including cases of sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5:1–2), and marriage disputes, food sacrificed to idols, and worship practices. Spiritual elitism further complicated matters, as some members prized charismatic gifts—such as glossolalia—above others, creating disorder and exclusion within worship (1 Cor. 12–14).<sup>12</sup> Questions of gender roles in prayer and

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<sup>8</sup> Panayotis Coutsoumpos, *Paul, Corinth, and the Roman Empire* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> J. Wessels, *Paul's approach to the cultural conflict in Corinth: a socio-historical study*. Vol. 7. (Münster: LIT Verlag Münster, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> J. Wessels, *Paul's approach to the cultural conflict in Corinth: a socio-historical study*. Vol. 7. LIT Verlag Münster, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Panayotis Coutsoumpos, *Paul, Corinth, and the Roman Empire*.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The first epistle to the Corinthians*; Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Ada, MI: Baker Books, 2023).

prophecy (1 Cor. 11:2–16; 14:34–35) also reveal contested dynamics of authority and participation, with scholars debating whether Paul reinforced patriarchal norms or introduced countercultural principles of mutuality.<sup>1314</sup>

Socioeconomic inequalities exacerbated these problems. The Lord's Supper became a site of class-based exclusion, where wealthier members humiliated poorer believers (1 Cor. 11:17–22). As Liubinskas and Punt argue, such practices reflect how Corinth's patronage system seeped into ecclesial life, distorting the church's witness.<sup>1516</sup> This contextual complexity makes 1 Corinthians not simply a theological treatise but a response to structural and relational dysfunctions within an urban congregation.

## **Purpose**

Paul's purpose in writing was not merely to correct isolated behaviours but to reorient the community around a Christ-centred identity that transcended social, cultural, and economic divides. He calls the church to unity, but not uniformity, insisting that diversity of gifts and backgrounds be held together by love (1 Cor. 12–13). His pastoral aim was holistic: to restore moral integrity, regulate worship practices, affirm the equal value of all gifts, and redefine leadership as servant stewardship rather than authoritarian control.<sup>1718</sup> By addressing issues of factionalism, immorality, charismatic elitism, and inequitable leadership structures, Paul sought to reshape the church as a Spirit-empowered body reflecting Christ's humility and holiness. This letter thus functions both as a theological manifesto and a pastoral handbook, bridging doctrine and practice.

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<sup>13</sup> K Syreeni, "Paul and love patriarchalism: Problems and prospects." In *die Skriflig* 37, no. 3 (2003).

<sup>14</sup> K. L. Reinhard, "Conscience, Interdependence, and Embodied Difference: What Paul's Ecclesial Principles Can Offer the Contemporary Church." *Anglican Theological Review* 94, no. 3 (2012).

<sup>15</sup> S Liubinskas, "The body of Christ in Mission: Paul's Ecclesiology and the Role of the Church in Mission." *Missiology* 41, no. 4 (2013): 402-415.

<sup>16</sup> J Punt, "Paul, body theology, and morality: Parameters for a discussion." *Neotestamentica* 39, no. 2 (2005).

<sup>17</sup> D. E. Garland, *First Corinthians*, 604.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen C. Barton and Andrew J. Byers, *One God, One People: Oneness and Unity in Early Christianity (Resources for Biblical Study 104)*, 237.

## Contemporary Relevance

Reading 1 Corinthians in light of Corinth's socio-cultural context highlights its continuing relevance. Just as class, gender, and patronage shaped the Corinthian church, modern churches wrestle with similar structural inequities: gender bias in leadership, prosperity-gospel hierarchies, and exclusionary practices that marginalise the poor or powerless.<sup>1920</sup> The challenge of spiritual elitism persists, particularly in contexts where visible gifts or celebrity leadership are elevated above ordinary discipleship. By revisiting Paul's contextualised response, churches today can discern strategies for confronting inequality, cultivating inclusive worship, and reasserting love as the foundation of community life.

In light of this context and purpose, the present study seeks to move beyond descriptive exegesis by examining how Paul's counsel to the Corinthians can inform contemporary ecclesial practice. Whereas existing scholarship often treats 1 Corinthians as primarily theological or historical,<sup>2122</sup> this research emphasises its practical applicability to modern dilemmas of division, immorality, misuse of gifts, and leadership crises. By situating Paul's responses within their first-century socio-cultural framework and aligning them with today's realities, the study aims to answer how unity, love, spiritual maturity, and servant leadership may be reclaimed as guiding principles for church renewal in the twenty-first century.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative and hermeneutical approach, with the historical-grammatical method as its primary interpretive tool. This method is most suitable because it seeks to uncover the intended meaning of the biblical text by attending to the original language, historical setting, and socio-cultural background.<sup>23</sup> Since the central aim of this research is to bridge Paul's first-century counsel with twenty-first-century church dilemmas, a hermeneutical approach ensures both fidelity to the text and relevance to contemporary contexts. The historical-grammatical method enables close

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<sup>19</sup> Douglas C. Youvan, "The Decline of Christian Understanding: From Apostolic Knowledge to Modern Fragmentation". *ResearchGate* (2024): 1-36. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.17897.71529>.

<sup>20</sup> Michael W Austin, *Humility: Rediscovering the Way of Love and Life in Christ* .

<sup>21</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The first epistle to the Corinthians*.

<sup>22</sup> D. E. Garland, *First Corinthians*, 604-605.

<sup>23</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel. "New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis." (2016): 124-125.

textual analysis of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians.<sup>24</sup> For example, Greek terms such as *schismata* ("divisions," 1 Cor. 1:10), *charismata* ("gifts," 1 Cor. 12:4), and *agapē* ("love," 1 Cor. 13:1–13) are examined in light of their semantic range and theological significance. This approach also takes into account Corinth's socio-cultural environment—its patronage system, class stratification, and gender norms—which shaped the church's struggles. By situating Paul's words in their original context, the study avoids anachronism while preparing for constructive application in modern settings.

Secondary sources are critically integrated to enrich interpretation. Commentators such as Fee, Garland, and Blomberg provide exegetical depth, while more recent studies on ecclesiology, leadership, and moral formation help connect Paul's theology to contemporary concerns. These works are compared to highlight points of consensus—such as the centrality of love in Paul's vision—and divergence, for instance, in interpretations of gender roles or the regulation of charismatic gifts. To strengthen the practical dimension, the study also draws from interdisciplinary insights. Sociological perspectives on inequality, patronage, and gender bias provide lenses for understanding how Corinthian dynamics parallel modern church structures. Leadership studies inform the discussion of Paul's model of servanthood in contrast to modern patterns of authoritarian or celebrity leadership. This interdisciplinary engagement ensures that the findings are not only exegetically sound but also pastorally and organizationally relevant.

The methodology, however, is not without limitations. Interpretive bias remains an unavoidable factor, as contemporary cultural assumptions may shape how Paul's counsel is read. Moreover, the historical distance between Corinth's urban Greco-Roman environment and today's global church contexts presents challenges in direct application. While the historical-grammatical method minimises anachronism, it cannot fully resolve the tension between text and context. This study acknowledges these interpretive challenges while seeking to apply Paul's wisdom responsibly and critically. In sum, this methodological framework—grounded in historical-grammatical exegesis, enriched by critical secondary scholarship, and complemented by interdisciplinary perspectives—offers a robust approach for examining how Paul's instructions on unity, gifts, love, and leadership can serve as resources for addressing contemporary church dilemmas.

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<sup>24</sup> Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell, eds. *Biblical hermeneutics: Five views* (Lisle, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012).



## RESULTS

### **Pauline Ecclesial Ethics: Unity, Love, and Servant Leadership as Correctives to Church Fragmentation**

This study identified four interrelated concerns in Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians—division, misuse of spiritual gifts, lack of communal love, and leadership crises—that remain pressing in contemporary Christian communities. While Paul's theological responses are foundational, their application today requires critical analysis, attention to contextual limits, and integration with global church experiences.

#### ***Division and Conflict***

The analysis of 1 Corinthians 1:10–17 reveals that division within the Corinthian church stemmed from misplaced allegiance to human leaders rather than to Christ himself. Paul's appeal that believers "be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Cor. 1:10) calls attention to the theological root of disunity: pride and self-exaltation.<sup>25</sup> Fee argues that such factionalism undermined the very foundation of the gospel, which centers on Christ's crucifixion rather than rhetorical skill or social prestige.<sup>26</sup> The study finds that this theological distortion mirrors modern denominational rivalries and leadership cults, where personal charisma eclipses the centrality of Christ.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Paul's response—reasserting Christ as the sole basis of unity—offers an enduring corrective to ecclesial fragmentation.

Further textual and socio-historical analysis indicates that Corinthian divisions were reinforced by the city's patronage system and class stratification. Winter notes that Corinth's elite members imported Greco-Roman notions of honor into the church, seeking influence through associations with respected leaders.<sup>28</sup> This cultural infiltration produced a community divided along economic and rhetorical lines, echoing the dynamics of clients and patrons.<sup>29</sup> Garland emphasizes that Paul's admonition to "belong to Christ" (1 Cor. 1:12) rejects such social constructs, recasting equality under the

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<sup>25</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 72.

<sup>26</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 75.

<sup>27</sup> Douglas C. Youvan, "The Decline of Christian Understanding", 29.

<sup>28</sup> W. Winter, *After Paul left Corinth: The influence of secular ethics and social change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), 221.

<sup>29</sup> Panayotis Coutsoumpas, *Paul, Corinth, and the Roman Empire*, 44.

lordship of Christ.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, unity for Paul is not institutional conformity but the ethical reformation of relationships grounded in humility and mutual regard.

A third finding concerns Paul's rhetorical method in confronting division. Drawing on Greco-Roman persuasion conventions, Paul subverted the honor–shame culture by redefining boasting as glorying in the cross: “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Cor. 1:31).<sup>31</sup> Coutsoumpos observes that this rhetorical inversion dismantled the Corinthian obsession with eloquence and prestige, turning the cross into a paradigm of divine wisdom expressed through weakness.<sup>32</sup> By deconstructing cultural notions of honor, Paul transformed the discourse of power into a discourse of service. This rhetorical strategy demonstrates that unity is not achieved through argument but through shared submission to the cruciform identity of Christ. Such an approach remains relevant to modern leadership contexts shaped by competitiveness and status-seeking.

The application of Pauline unity requires structural and relational transformation in contemporary churches. Ezeoruonye notes that unity without justice is fragile; it must be sustained by equitable participation and transparent governance.<sup>33</sup> In African congregations, where ethnic and denominational loyalties persist, implementing Christ-centered reconciliation models has proven effective in fostering collaboration.<sup>34</sup> Barton and Byers affirm that true Christian unity emerges not from organizational mergers but from shared participation in the Spirit.<sup>35</sup> In Western contexts, political polarisation within congregations has also proven resistant to theological appeals for unity. While Paul's principle remains theologically sound, its practical success depends on integrating conflict resolution practices, transparent governance, and even legal frameworks when disputes escalate beyond dialogue.

### ***Spiritual Gifts and Charismatic Elitism***

The study's analysis of 1 Corinthians 12–14 reveals that Paul understood spiritual gifts (*charismata*) as divine endowments given for the common good, not for self-

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<sup>30</sup> David E. Garland, *First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 64.

<sup>31</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (Crossway, 2016), 1 Cor. 1:31.

<sup>32</sup> Panayotis Coutsoumpos, *Paul, Corinth, and the Roman Empire*, 47.

<sup>33</sup> John C. Ezeoruonye. “1 Corinthians 12:12–31 and Unity,” *Vejoh-Veritas Journal of Humanities* 5, no. 2 (2024): 210. <https://www.acjol.org/index.php/veritas/article/view/5736>.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Osei Akoto, “Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics”. *Journal of MOTBIT* 6, no. 3 (2024): 26-28. <https://doi.org/10.38159/motbit.2024631>.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen C. Barton and Andrew J. Byers, *One God, One People: Oneness and Unity in Early Christianity*, 58.



promotion.<sup>36</sup> His assertion that “to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7) directly challenges elitist tendencies in Corinth.<sup>37</sup> Fee emphasizes that Paul’s corrective aimed to restore order and equality by centering all gifts in love and service.<sup>38</sup> In many modern charismatic movements, however, this Pauline principle has been neglected, with public manifestations of power valued over hidden acts of compassion.<sup>39</sup> The study identifies this imbalance as a key contributor to spiritual hierarchy and exclusion in contemporary worship.

Lexical analysis of the Greek term *charismata* (“gifts”) highlights its derivation from *charis* (“grace”), indicating that all gifts are graciously given and meant for communal edification rather than individual acclaim.<sup>40</sup> Bauer’s lexicon confirms that *charismata* emphasizes the relational dimension of grace, where empowerment exists for the benefit of others.<sup>41</sup> This linguistic insight reframes the theology of gifting from privilege to stewardship. Furthermore, Paul’s repeated use of *oikodomē* (“building up”) stresses that the Spirit’s work is corporate, constructing the church as a collective organism of interdependent members.<sup>42</sup> These findings show that Paul’s theology of gifts is inseparable from his ecclesiology of love and participation.

Comparative analysis between Corinthian and contemporary churches underscores the need for deliberate structures that embody Pauline balance. Liubinskas documents how congregations that diversify ministry roles and affirm non-spectacular gifts experience greater unity and engagement.<sup>43</sup> Ezeoruonye similarly demonstrates that participatory worship and mentoring reduce spiritual elitism and restore equality among members.<sup>44</sup> Paul’s model insists that love (*agapē*) is the measure of true spirituality, without which gifts lose their redemptive purpose (1 Cor. 13:1–3).<sup>20</sup> Consequently, this

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<sup>36</sup> Robert Young, *Young's Analytical Concordance*. Associated Publishers and Authors (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2018); Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*.

<sup>37</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 1 Cor. 12:7.

<sup>38</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 493.

<sup>39</sup> Benjamin Crisp, “A Tale of Two Worlds,” in *Biblical Organisational Spirituality* (Cham: Springer, 2022), 184.

<sup>40</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 134.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 136.

<sup>42</sup> David K. Bernard, “Paul’s Christology in the Corinthian Letters”. *Religions* 15, no. 6 (2024): a721. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15060721>.

<sup>43</sup> Susann Liubinskas, “The Body of Christ in Mission: Paul’s Ecclesiology and the Role of the Church in Mission”: 404-412.

<sup>44</sup> John C. Ezeoruonye, “1 Corinthians 12:12–31 and Unity: A Christian Response to Cultural and Religious Divides”: 208.

study concludes that rediscovering the communal purpose of gifts is crucial to correcting modern charismatic imbalance and cultivating mature spirituality.

### ***Love and Community***

The study finds that Paul's exposition of *agapē* in 1 Corinthians 13 serves as the moral axis of his ecclesial theology. Rather than defining love abstractly, Paul portrays it through concrete actions—patience, kindness, and humility—that reconfigure social relations within the community.<sup>45</sup> Thompson argues that *agapē* functions as the ethical power that transforms competition into cooperation and hierarchy into service.<sup>46</sup> When interpreted within Corinth's context of status rivalry, love emerges as the antidote to self-centered religiosity.<sup>47</sup> The findings show that Paul's teaching integrates theology and morality, making love both the foundation and the proof of authentic spirituality.

Contemporary applications of this principle highlight its enduring relevance. Gorman contends that "becoming the gospel" entails embodying love through tangible acts of justice, inclusion, and mutual care.<sup>48</sup> Empirical observation of churches that integrate Pauline ethics into community service programs demonstrates increased cohesion and trust among members.<sup>49</sup> In this sense, love operates as the sustaining force that unites believers beyond doctrinal or cultural differences. The study therefore affirms that *agapē* is not merely the emotional center of Christian faith but the social mechanism through which unity and witness are realized.

### ***Leadership and Authority***

Paul's writings portray leadership as stewardship—a model grounded in humility, accountability, and service. His statement that leaders are "servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries" (1 Cor. 4:1) redefines authority as responsibility rather than privilege.<sup>50</sup> Fee notes that this concept stands in sharp contrast to the Greco-Roman model of power, where leaders derived honor from dominance and wealth.<sup>51</sup> Furnish

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<sup>45</sup> James W. Thompson, *Moral Formation according to Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 186.

<sup>46</sup> James W. Thompson, *Moral Formation according to Paul*, 88.

<sup>47</sup> Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul left Corinth: The influence of secular ethics and social change*, 215.

<sup>48</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 241.

<sup>49</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 245.

<sup>50</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 1 Cor. 4:1.

<sup>51</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 184.

similarly argues that Paul's ethical transformation of leadership marks a decisive shift from hierarchy to relational service.<sup>52</sup> The study observes that many modern church crises—abuse of authority, financial mismanagement, and moral failure—stem from neglecting this Pauline framework.

Further results show that humility functions as the ethical foundation of authentic leadership. Austin interprets humility not as passivity but as disciplined strength that empowers others to flourish.<sup>53</sup> Churches that emphasize shared governance and mentorship, rather than unilateral control, better embody Paul's vision of leadership as stewardship.<sup>54</sup> In such settings, accountability becomes a mutual process rather than a punitive measure. The findings affirm that servant leadership must integrate both spiritual maturity and organizational integrity to sustain credibility and trust.

Additional data from African Independent Churches illustrate contextual adaptations of Pauline leadership principles. Liubinskas reports that congregations adopting council-based governance experience enhanced transparency and resilience against authoritarian tendencies.<sup>55</sup> Gorman's participatory ecclesiology further supports this approach by framing leadership as communal empowerment rather than individual prestige.<sup>56</sup> The evidence confirms that the Pauline model remains applicable across diverse cultures, offering a theological and practical framework for renewing church leadership in the modern era.

### **Beyond the Four Themes: Emerging Issues**

The findings demonstrate that Paul's theological and ethical framework transcends the historical situation of Corinth, offering principles adaptable to the challenges of modernity. His triad of unity, love, and stewardship serves as a moral compass for communities navigating new forms of fragmentation in digital culture and postmodern pluralism. Cray observes that the "digital ecclesia" risks replicating the factionalism of Corinth, where personal platforms replace the communal altar.<sup>57</sup> Yet, Paul's insistence

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<sup>52</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 74.

<sup>53</sup> Michael W. Austin, *Humility: Rediscovering the Way of Love and Life in Christ*, 88.

<sup>54</sup> Graham Cray, *On Mission with Jesus* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2024), 64.

<sup>55</sup> Susann Liubinskas, "The Body of Christ in Mission: Paul's Ecclesiology and the Role of the Church in Mission": 410.

<sup>56</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 312.

<sup>57</sup> Graham Cray, *On Mission with Jesus: Changing the Default Setting of the Church*, 63.

that all belong to one body in Christ (1 Cor. 12:12) provides a corrective: digital engagement must embody relational humility and shared identity. Thus, Pauline theology extends into cyberspace as an ethical pattern of belonging that resists isolation and self-promotion.

A second emerging issue concerns ecological theology. Gorman interprets Paul's participatory vision of the body of Christ as a paradigm for ecological solidarity, suggesting that creation's interdependence mirrors ecclesial unity.<sup>58</sup> This study corroborates that interpretation by noting the lexical and theological overlap between Paul's concepts of *koinōnia* (fellowship) and the broader notion of cosmic reconciliation (cf. Rom. 8:19–22). Such insights position Pauline theology as a fertile source for developing an ethic of environmental stewardship grounded in divine grace. Winter further argues that Paul's adaptability to Corinth's civic environment implies a missional openness to ecological consciousness today.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, the theology of the cross not only reconciles people to God but calls humanity to responsible participation in the renewal of creation.

Third, the findings identify the relevance of Pauline wisdom to interfaith and intercultural dialogue. Barton and Byers note that Paul's inclusive vision of "one God and one people" (1 Cor. 8:6) establishes a foundation for relational engagement without doctrinal compromise.<sup>60</sup> In plural societies, his ethic of love offers a framework for respecting difference while affirming Christ as the unifying center. The study observes that modern conflicts—religious polarization, ethnocentrism, and exclusion—can be critically addressed through Pauline principles of humility and service. This approach reframes interfaith dialogue not as relativism but as hospitality rooted in cruciform love. In this way, Paul's letters continue to inspire reconciliation across boundaries that divide both ancient and modern communities.

Finally, the study affirms that 1 Corinthians represents a living paradigm of contextual theology—capable of renewing the church's witness in every generation. Thompson underscores that Paul's moral formation is inherently transformative, calling

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<sup>58</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission*, 312.

<sup>59</sup> Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change*, 254.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen C. Barton and Andrew J. Byers, *One God, One People: Oneness and Unity in Early Christianity*, 59.

believers to embody the gospel within their cultural moment.<sup>61</sup> This dynamism allows Pauline theology to remain relevant across digital, ecological, and intercultural frontiers. The study concludes that Paul's wisdom offers a model of adaptive fidelity: holding fast to Christ while creatively engaging the realities of modern life. Hence, his theology functions not merely as historical doctrine but as an ongoing conversation between text, context, and transformation.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Application for the Church Today**

The analysis of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians provides not only theological insights but also practical frameworks for addressing contemporary church dilemmas. While his vision of unity, love, and servant leadership is foundational, application requires contextual adaptation to modern realities such as digital ministry, generational change, interfaith relations, and ecological responsibility.

### ***Unity in Diversity and Equality of Gifts***

Paul's metaphor of the body in 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 encapsulates one of the most profound theological responses to division in the early church. His emphasis on the equal value of all members, regardless of status or function, undermines Corinth's class-based hierarchy and challenges modern church elitism.<sup>62</sup> Paul's instruction that "the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Cor. 12:22) redefines strength and service through a Christ-centered lens.<sup>63</sup> Fee argues that Paul's theology of the body serves not merely as a metaphor but as an ecclesial blueprint for interdependence, illustrating that diversity is essential to unity rather than a threat to it.<sup>64</sup> This vision calls for a radical reorientation of church life—one that recognizes the Spirit's gifting of all believers as the foundation for authentic community.<sup>65</sup>

In applying this principle to contemporary ecclesiology, churches must move beyond rhetorical inclusivity toward structural embodiment of equality. Garland notes

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<sup>61</sup> James W. Thompson, *Moral Formation according to Paul: The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics*, 192.

<sup>62</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 482.

<sup>63</sup> The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (Crossway, 2016), 1 Cor. 12:22.

<sup>64</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 485.

<sup>65</sup> David K. Bernard, "Paul's Christology in the Corinthian Letters": a721.

that Paul's correction in Corinth was not abstract theology but a pastoral strategy to dismantle social hierarchies and restore mutual care within the congregation.<sup>66</sup> Many modern congregations replicate Corinthian tendencies, where visible gifts such as preaching or prophecy are privileged above less glamorous roles like administration or intercession.<sup>67</sup> Ezeorunye's study shows that reasserting the value of every gift requires both doctrinal clarity and intentional formation through teaching, mentoring, and participatory worship practices.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, Paul's call to unity through diversity remains both a theological and organizational imperative for modern churches seeking genuine community.

The equality of gifts has implications beyond church liturgy—it reshapes the moral and social imagination of believers. Thompson observes that Paul's moral formation model rests on communal reciprocity rather than individual achievement, grounding ethics in shared participation in Christ's body.<sup>69</sup> When congregations cultivate spaces where members' diverse contributions are valued, they embody a countercultural testimony against competition and hierarchy. In African contexts, where social stratification and patron-client systems persist, implementing Paul's vision offers liberation from cultural patterns of domination.<sup>70</sup> Unity in diversity is not uniformity but a manifestation of divine creativity, revealing the church as a living organism animated by the Spirit's multiplicity of gifts.<sup>71</sup>

### ***Ecumenical and Cross-Denominational Collaboration***

Paul's theology of interdependence also provides a critical foundation for ecumenical and inter-church collaboration in the twenty-first century. His appeal that "there be no divisions among you" (1 Cor. 1:10) challenges denominational fragmentation by calling for unity grounded in the confession of Christ rather than institutional

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<sup>66</sup> David E. Garland, *First Corinthians*, 607.

<sup>67</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues*, 69; Furnish, Victor Paul. "Paul and the Corinthians: The letters, the challenges of ministry, the Gospel." *Interpretation* 52, no. 3 (1998): 229-245.

<sup>68</sup> John C. Ezeorunye, "1 Corinthians 12:12-31 and Unity: A Christian Response to Cultural and Religious Divides": 208.

<sup>69</sup> James W. Thompson, *Moral Formation according to Paul*, 186.

<sup>70</sup> Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change*, 214.

<sup>71</sup> Susann Liubinskis, "The Body of Christ in Mission: Paul's Ecclesiology and the Role of the Church in Mission": 412.



identity.<sup>72</sup> Barton and Byers argue that the early church's oneness was sustained not by uniformity but by shared participation in the Spirit, which remains the guiding principle for ecumenical engagement today. Movements such as the Global Christian Forum illustrate this Pauline dynamic by fostering dialogue across doctrinal and cultural boundaries.<sup>73</sup> Yet, as historical tensions persist, genuine unity demands humility, mutual accountability, and repentance for past sectarianism.<sup>74</sup>

At the local level, ecumenical collaboration becomes a lived expression of Paul's theology of the body. When churches engage in joint mission, worship, or community service, they embody the relational unity that transcends denominational lines. Gorman emphasizes that such unity is participatory—rooted in the believers' shared identity in Christ rather than institutional conformity.<sup>75</sup> This model invites churches to reimagine their identity not as isolated entities but as interconnected expressions of the same divine mission. In so doing, Paul's vision becomes both a theological and missional mandate for the divided global church.<sup>76</sup>

### ***Leadership Renewal***

Paul's conception of leadership as stewardship (1 Cor. 4:1–5) redefines authority through the lens of humility, service, and accountability. His self-identification as a “servant of Christ and steward of God's mysteries” demonstrates that leadership in the church is a vocation of responsibility rather than privilege.<sup>77</sup> Fee contends that Paul's model deliberately subverts the Greco-Roman ideals of power, replacing them with a theology of servanthood rooted in Christ's example.<sup>78</sup> This contrast exposes a crucial tension between spiritual authority and human ambition, a tension that remains relevant in today's ecclesial landscape.<sup>79</sup> Leadership, according to Paul, is validated not by charisma or success but by faithfulness and moral integrity.

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<sup>72</sup> Stephen C. Barton and Andrew J. Byers, *One God, One People: Oneness and Unity in Early Christianity*, 52.

<sup>73</sup> Dirk G. Van der Merwe, “Lived experiences of the ‘Wisdom of God’ according to 1 Corinthians 2”. In *die Skriflig* 58, no. 1 (2024): a3041. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v58i1.3041>.

<sup>74</sup> Stephen J. Chester, *Reading Paul with the Reformers*, 113.

<sup>75</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 241.

<sup>76</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 134.

<sup>77</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 97.

<sup>78</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 101.

<sup>79</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, “Paul and the Corinthians: The Letters, the Challenges of Ministry, the Gospel”: 238.

In modern contexts, leadership crises—from financial scandals to moral failures—reveal how far many churches have strayed from Paul's vision. Austin highlights that humility in leadership is not weakness but disciplined self-restraint that enables others to flourish.<sup>80</sup> Furnish similarly warns that rhetoric of servant leadership can be hollow if unaccompanied by transparent governance and ethical accountability.<sup>81</sup> The Hillsong crisis and similar cases expose the danger of charisma without character, where institutional prestige overshadows pastoral integrity.<sup>82</sup> Renewing leadership in the Pauline sense requires both inner transformation and external reform—structures of oversight, rotation of authority, and participatory decision-making that embody humility in practice.

The renewal of leadership thus depends on integrating theological conviction with practical mechanisms of accountability. Gorman's participatory missiology underscores that leadership is always communal; it must enable the body to function, not dominate it.<sup>83</sup> Winter's socio-historical study of Corinth reminds us that Paul himself confronted leaders who conflated authority with honor, redirecting them toward servanthood as the true mark of apostleship.<sup>84</sup> In the African Independent Churches, rotating leadership roles and collective councils of elders exemplify adaptations of this Pauline principle that prevent concentration of power. When the church embraces leadership as stewardship rather than status, it becomes a credible witness of the gospel's transforming power.<sup>85</sup> Paul's model, therefore, continues to serve as both a critique and a corrective for the church's pursuit of integrity in every generation.

### ***Responding to Emerging Challenges***

While Paul did not directly address digitalization, ecological crises, or interfaith pluralism, his theological principles remain remarkably adaptable. His vision of love (1 Cor. 13) and stewardship provides a hermeneutical key for navigating these new realities.<sup>86</sup> Cray argues that the church's mission today must "change its default setting"

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<sup>80</sup> Michael W. Austin, *Humility: Rediscovering the Way of Love and Life in Christ*, 88.

<sup>81</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul*, 71; Dirk G. Van der Merwe, "Lived experiences of the 'Wisdom of God' according to 1 Corinthians 2": a3041.

<sup>82</sup> Douglas C. Youvan, "The Decline of Christian Understanding: From Apostolic Knowledge to Modern Fragmentation": 29.

<sup>83</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 312.

<sup>84</sup> Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change*, 254.

<sup>85</sup> James W. Thompson, *Moral Formation according to Paul*, 192.

<sup>86</sup> Benjamin Crisp, "A Tale of Two Worlds", 189.

by translating Pauline love into social responsibility and digital ethics.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Gorman interprets Paul's participatory theology as a foundation for ecological awareness—where creation is part of the divine community of interdependence.<sup>88</sup> These readings extend Paul's original intent without distorting it, affirming that theological fidelity includes contextual creativity. Thus, applying Paul's wisdom in modern dilemmas demands interpretive courage coupled with critical reflection.

Furthermore, interfaith engagement in pluralistic societies may draw from Paul's ethic of humility and dialogical witness. Rather than triumphalism, the Pauline model encourages respect and empathy grounded in Christlike love. Akoto's study on African hermeneutics suggests that contextual application of Scripture must begin with dialogue rather than domination.<sup>89</sup> In this way, Paul's letters continue to offer moral and relational paradigms for addressing issues he could not have foreseen, yet which resonate deeply with his theology of love and unity.<sup>90</sup>

### ***Practical Frameworks for Application***

To operationalize Pauline theology, churches today require frameworks that integrate biblical principles with sociological realities. Thompson's model of moral formation emphasizes the coherence of ethics and community, asserting that Pauline teaching aims at embodied transformation rather than abstract moralism.<sup>91</sup> Practical ecclesiology thus involves creating participatory structures where doctrine shapes behavior and organization. Fee and Gorman both stress that theology without praxis is incomplete; it must produce communities of mutual accountability and shared service.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, ecclesial renewal depends on mechanisms such as transparent leadership, collaborative decision-making, and continuous education in Pauline ethics.

Sustainability in applying Paul's principles necessitates contextual innovation. Churches in postcolonial and digital contexts must reinterpret unity, love, and stewardship through culturally resonant forms. Winter's socio-historical analysis reminds us that Paul himself adapted his theology to Corinth's changing social conditions,

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<sup>87</sup> Graham Cray, *On Mission with Jesus: Changing the default setting of the church*, 61.

<sup>88</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 312.

<sup>89</sup> Richard Osei Akoto, "Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics": 27.

<sup>90</sup> Timothy J. Christian. "Paul and Rhetoric Revisited: Reexamining Litfin's Assumptions on Pauline Preaching in 1 Corinthians". *Religions* 16, no. 3 (2025): a363. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16030363>.

<sup>91</sup> James W. Thompson, *Moral Formation according to Paul*, 186.

<sup>92</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, 104.

balancing fidelity and flexibility.<sup>93</sup> In the same manner, modern congregations are called to embody Pauline virtues dynamically—reforming structures that inhibit unity while preserving the apostle's Christ-centered foundation.<sup>94</sup> In this sense, Paul's wisdom is not a static inheritance but a living resource that continues to renew the church in every generation.

Application of 1 Corinthians today is not simply about exhorting churches to embody unity, love, or service; it requires deliberate structures, critical reflection, and contextual innovation. By integrating Paul's theological framework with empirical insights from global church practices, congregations can move toward renewal that is both biblically grounded and socially transformative.

## CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians and explored its relevance for contemporary church dilemmas. By focusing on issues of division, misuse of spiritual gifts, the centrality of love, and models of leadership, the analysis demonstrates that Paul's counsel remains a valuable theological and pastoral resource. However, the findings also reveal that applying Pauline wisdom requires careful contextualization rather than universalising assumptions. Academically, the study contributes to Pauline scholarship by bridging historical-grammatical exegesis with practical theology. It underscores that Paul's letters must be read not only as theological texts but also as responses to socio-cultural and structural challenges in Corinth—such as class stratification, patronage systems, and gender dynamics. By integrating interdisciplinary perspectives from sociology and leadership studies, the research demonstrates how Pauline theology can inform contemporary debates on ecclesiology, authority, and community life. Pastorally, the study offers concrete frameworks for church renewal, including participatory ecclesiology, ecumenical collaboration, and leadership accountability mechanisms. These insights show that Paul's principles—unity in diversity, love as the supreme ethic, and leadership as stewardship—can be translated into practical strategies for addressing crises such as

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<sup>93</sup> Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change*, 254.

<sup>94</sup> Timothy J. Christian. "Paul and Rhetoric Revisited: Reexamining Litfin's Assumptions on Pauline Preaching in 1 Corinthians": a363.

church splits, authoritarianism, prosperity-gospel abuses, and the marginalisation of weaker voices within the body of Christ.

The study acknowledges several limitations. First, the historical-grammatical method cannot fully bridge the cultural distance between first-century Corinth and twenty-first-century churches. Second, the qualitative approach, while rich in theological depth, does not provide empirical data on how churches currently apply Paul's principles. Third, the focus on 1 Corinthians limits comparison with other Pauline letters, such as Romans or Galatians, which could provide additional perspectives on unity, law, and freedom. These limitations open pathways for further study. Future research could include empirical investigations into how different church traditions implement Pauline leadership principles, comparative studies across Paul's epistles, and interdisciplinary projects examining the intersection of Pauline theology with contemporary issues such as digital ecclesiology, ecological theology, and interfaith engagement. Studies within the Global South in particular could provide richer insights into how Paul's counsel resonates in contexts shaped by poverty, pluralism, and political instability. In conclusion, Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians is not a timeless blueprint to be applied uncritically, but a theological resource that must be interpreted contextually and critically. Its enduring contribution lies in calling the church back to a Christ-centred identity shaped by love, humility, and interdependence. When responsibly re-appropriated, Paul's wisdom offers not only academic insight but also practical guidance for cultivating resilient, inclusive, and Spirit-led communities in a fractured world.

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