

The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians

Background Information

**Sources: The Harper Collins Study Bible: NRSV Introductory article by Victor Paul Furnish
The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X; 1 Corinthians Commentary and Notes by J. Paul Sampley**

Author, Date, Circumstances of Writing

About seventeen years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Paul, who had become a believer about fourteen years earlier, preached the gospel to gentiles and perhaps a few Jews in Corinth and a church was formed there. (Sampley)

Both scholars put the date of the letter at about 54 C.E.

Corinth was the capital city of the Roman province, Achaia (uh-ki-uh) or (uh-kay-uh)

“Corinth was a large and prospering urban center with an ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse population.”

Paul wrote from Ephesus where he intended to stay until he travels to Macedonia and then on to Corinth; Timothy has been sent on ahead. “The bearers of this letter may have been the Corinthians named in 16:17.” (Furnish)

The City of Corinth

Corinth was a big commercial hub of that part of the world at the time and was a crossroads where many sailors and travelers passed through bringing with them their religions. “Modern archeologists find evidence for most of the more than two dozen temples, altars, and shrines that the mid-second-century Greek chronicler Pausanias described. The archaeological evidence confirms that Greek and Egyptian religious shrines coexisted there along with the Roman imperial cult.” (Sampley)

Corinth had the reputation as a “sin city” with a “superficial cultural life,” great wealth, and an “abuse of the poor by the wealthy.” An ancient writer, Alciphron, characterized Corinthians as persons “without grace [or charm] and not the least convivial.” Alciphron wrote about them more than once each time using derogatory language like this. (Sampley)

The Church in Corinth

More importantly, for our study, the church in Corinth also had a reputation. *First Clement*, a document written from the church in Rome a full generation after Paul's time, notes that the Corinthian Christians continue to “engage in partisan strife” just as in Paul's time. “Paul's letter will give evidence that the Corinthian reputation, both as a city and as a church, is well deserved.” (Sampley) This squares with what we know about some churches today; it seems that some groups have conflict in their DNA that goes on for generations. (ds)

The church was primarily Gentile though it appears there were a few Jews. A few of the members appear to have been people of “prominence, but most were people of lesser means

and of lower social standing.” “It is likely that there were small groups of believers situated in different quarters of the city, who then regularly [came] together as a church for a common meal and worship.” (Furnish)

Occasion and Purpose

Paul writes in answer to a letter the Corinthians have sent to him which has not survived, “seeking his views about several disputed matters.”

“In addition he is responding to reports, conveyed by word of mouth, about serious disorders within the congregation, the jockeying of rival groups for control, an indifference to cases of flagrant immorality, a disregard for those who are not fully enlightened about appropriate Christian conduct, and the marginalizing of the congregation’s disadvantaged members. In the midst of this, Paul’s own apostolic authority seems to have been called into question.”

“Overall, the letter summons this fractious congregation to manifest the unity and concord that, in Paul’s view, necessarily go along with their belonging to Christ. It opens with a call to unity, its central counsels are informed by the view of love that is set out in 8:1-3 and ch. 13, and it closes with an appeal to let love be the governing power in the life of the community.” (Sampley)

Paul’s Letters to the Corinthians

The very first letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians is often called the “previous letter” or “Letter A” which is also lost. So, the one the Bible calls “first” Corinthians is actually Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth. Nearly all scholars today believe it is a whole letter in and of itself. It is often referred to as “Letter B.”

Sometime after Paul had written and sent Letter B (1 Corinthians) he went to Corinth and “during that visit, one of the Corinthian believers made a verbal attack on Paul, and, to his chagrin, no one came to his defense. Mortified, Paul left.” He sent them another letter, “Letter C,” “of rather harsh frank speech,” which is also a lost letter, “calling them to task for the ‘one who did the wrong,’ chastising them for their abandonment of him, and calling them back into ‘obedience’ to him.”

Titus reported that the letter “achieved considerable success . . . though it is fair to say not quite as much as Paul had wished. The majority of the Corinthians embraced Paul and disciplined the man who had attacked him.”

Paul later writes his fourth letter to the Corinthians – “Letter D” – which is 2 Corinthians 1-9, and still letter fifth letter, “Letter E,” which is 2 Corinthians 10-13. (Sampley)

Wednesday, July 8 – 1 Cor 1

Notice what all is packed into the salutation and the thanksgiving (vss. 1-9). It's quite different than our, "Dear Jane," isn't it?

1. Fill in the blanks with all the information Paul gives especially the one that says "To"

From:

To:

What he offers: (v.3)

What is he thankful for? (vss. 4-9)

2. After all the opening words, what is the very first topic Paul undertakes? Why do you suppose he opens with that?
3. Why does Paul refer to the cross as foolishness and as a stumbling block? What does he mean?

Thursday, July 9 – 1 Cor 2

In 2:2 Paul says, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified . . ." He is using hyperbole here – he does know more, of course.

1. Why do you think he did that? (All that follows in this section of the chapter offers a hint.)
2. In this chapter Paul presents himself as a not-gifted speaker. Why does he do that?

3. Paul speaks at length about the Spirit and spiritual persons whose lives of faith are properly lived: He describes them in two complementary ways. What are they? You'll find the answers in 2:11 and 2:16

Friday, July 10 – 1 Cor 3

1. What is Paul talking about when he speaks of feeding the Corinthians with milk rather than solid food (vs. 2)?
2. What is the problem he is referring to in this chapter when he speaks of Apollos and himself?
3. In vss. 10-15 what does he say about "building" that both offers relief and responsibility to those who help others come to faith and grow in their faith?

Saturday, July 11 – 1 Cor 4

In the opening paragraph of Ch. 4 we see a good example of the theme of "honor and shame" or you could call it "praise and blame" that was the bedrock of society in Paul's day and still is many parts of the world. Where "acquisitiveness" might be our society's version of honor or praise, in Paul's day it was the avoidance of shame and in seeking honor. In 3:21-22, Paul proclaims that "all things are yours," indicating that through Christ God has already given us all things. Here in 4:7 he refers back to that idea with his questions.

1. In 4:7 what are the two questions that he asks and what does it mean by them?
2. In 4:14 he goes back to this theme, "I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children." Why does he take pains to spell this out, do you suppose?

Sunday, July 12 – Rest or Catch Up Day

Monday, July 13 – 1 Cor 5

In this case of the man living with his father's wife, we see the reference to the earlier letter, Letter A, in vss. 9-10 when Paul refers to having said they shouldn't associate with those who are sexually immoral. He clears up that he meant those in the church, not out in the world. Interesting that Paul doesn't address the wrong-doer himself; but he tells the church they ought to be mourning and ought to root out the one in the wrong. This radical step is "radical in the sense of getting to the root of proper community identity and comportment." (Sampley)

In the first four chapters Paul calls out boasting or being puffed up in general. Here he calls it out how in their "boasting" in the invincibility of who they are as Christians they have failed to call out one among them who is living in a way that is worse even than the pagans, as Paul sees it. He builds his argument layer upon layer.

1. How does Paul see this one man's sin in the larger context of the church not understanding and owning their identity as Jesus' own, as the recipients of a great gift of God?

Tuesday, July 14 – 1 Cor 6

The scholar Victor Paul Furnish says that the Corinthians seem to "believe that they are in some sense already 'reigning' with Christ in glory. . ." It sounds like Paul thought so too.

1. In vss. 1-8 Paul discusses two types of judging, and both kinds also find a modern expression. What are the two types of judging?

2. In vss. 9-11 it appears he tries to wake them up, bring them down to earth. How does he do that?

3. In vs. 12, what do you think Paul is saying when he writes, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial"?

Wednesday, July 15 – 1 Cor 7

Chapter 7 is Paul's response to questions about relationships and how to live as a Christian with regard to sexuality and sexual expression. Clearly this is one of the confusions left over from Paul's very first letter to the Corinthians, Letter A. Just to be clear, when he quotes the maxim in the first verse, "It is well for a man not to touch a woman," he is speaking of sexual intercourse, not a simple touch.

It is worth noting that Paul, often in the past considered sexist, speaks to married couples to say that each has authority over the other's body, not simply that the man has all authority.

1. What does he mean in vs. 7 when he says, "I wish that all were as I myself am"? Why do you think he said that?
2. What does he say about divorce? And what benefit does he say an unbelieving spouse gets by being married to a believer? What do you think about that?
3. What do you take vs. 17 to mean?
4. What is the "impending crisis" Paul speaks of in vs. 26?
5. What is Paul's great concern about marriage in vss. 32-35?

Thursday, July 16 – 1 Cor 8

1. What does Paul say about love and knowledge in vs. 1? What is he referring to?

2. Do you follow the argument about the weak and strong Paul is making about eating food that has been offered to idols? State it in a sentence or two.

Friday, July 17 – 1 Cor 9

1. As chapter 9 opens it appears Paul is digressing, asking, “I’m free, right?” “I’m an apostle, right?” Reading what follows, why do you suppose he does this?
2. This whole chapter offers models or examples of how to conduct ourselves as people of faith. What are some examples that Paul offers? Do they make sense to you?

Saturday, July 18 – 1 Cor 10

1. In the first part of chapter 10 Paul uses the people Israel in the Exodus as a cautionary tale, using them as a negative example. What are some of the sins he warns against?
2. Beginning with vs. 14, in warning about idolatry Paul speaks of the Lord’s Supper in words that will no doubt be very familiar to you. What is his message in this passage (vss. 14-22)?
3. As he sums up (for a second time) this part of the message, Paul repeats a line we first read in chapter 6. “All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial.” What is his point here?

Sunday, July 19 – Rest or Catch Up Day

Monday, July 20 – 1 Cor 11

1. In vs. 1 Paul says, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” Though this line is the opening of chapter 11, it really finishes Paul’s line of thought begun in 10:31 and continuing to the end of that chapter in vs. 33. In light of that, why does Paul say to imitate him as he imitates Jesus Christ?
2. For Paul, persuading the women of the Corinthian church to cover their hair in worship was clearly a big deal. It was normative for his other churches that women should cover their hair and so he spends fifteen verses (vss. 2-16) arguing that the Corinthian women should do so as well. He has two points: one, that God is over all and Christ Jesus is head of every man and the husband is the head of his wife; it’s natural for a woman to have long hair. How does his first argument (that the husband is the head of the wife) compare or contrast with his statement about men and women’s authority in 7:4? Consider also the fact that it was clear that women were leaders in worship at times in Corinth. What might a female Corinthian church member say to Paul in the face of his determination to have them cover their hair?
3. Beginning in vs. 17 Paul tackles the issues of how they are not sharing the Lord’s Supper. What all does he say they are doing wrong?
4. After the words of institution in vss. 23-26, Paul issues a warning and tells the church to examine themselves. Why does he do this and what is the warning?

Tuesday, July 21 – 1 Cor 12

Chapter 12 is about the proper use and function of spiritual gifts. Paul credits the Spirit with the giving of gifts and God who activates the gifts in us.

1. In vs. 7, according to Paul why are the gifts given?
2. What are the gifts named in vss. 8-10?

3. Beginning with vss. 12-13, Paul uses the body metaphor. What is the body?

4. What is Paul's point in vss. 14-26?

5. In vss. 27-31, Paul applies what he's been talking about in the previous verses to roles or particular gifts. Name the parts of the body listed in this passage.

Wednesday, July 22 – 1 Cor 13

This is such a familiar passage that it's easy to gloss over it. Take your time reading it today and try to see it with a fresh eye.

1. According to the first three verses, what is the importance of love?

2. Read vss. 4-8 again. Which of those rings most true for you?

3. Which is easiest for you to express as love?

4. Which is most difficult for you to express as love?

5. What do you think Paul is getting at in vss. 11-13?

Thursday, July 23 – 1 Cor 14

1. As chapter 14 opens, why should pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts?
2. What are the benefits of prophesying?
3. Though Paul doesn't speak disparagingly about speaking in tongues, he does list some limitations or problems with speaking in tongues. What are they? (vss. 2-12)
4. What is Paul saying in vs. 20?
5. You could say that the last line of vs. 26 sums up this part of 1 Cor 14. What is it?
6. *I confess I was anxious to see what the good scholar, Dr. Sampley, would do with vs. 34 and I was happy to see this notation: "This harsh passage, urging women's silence in church and subordination to their husbands, with an unspecified reference to the "the law" as support, is probably an insertion by an editor who subsequently took this Pauline letter and brought it into conformity with the practices regarding women in his own subsequent-to-Paul time." I was not happy simply because I am a woman who speaks in church (!) but because this verse seemed so out of step with other things Paul

says blessing women's leadership and participation in church throughout. No question for you, just interested in your comments, if any.

Friday, July 24 – 1 Cor 15 A Reminder of the Great Resurrection

As chapter 15 opens Paul offers a "chain-like argument": "preached the good news to you; you received it; you stand in it; you are saved through it; if you hold firmly to that message I preached to you; unless you don't believe it anymore. (my translation) He goes back to the basics in the first 11 verses. *Note that as he begins this section, he calls them brothers and sisters, allying himself with them.

Some in the church must have been questioning the resurrection of the dead. They apparently hadn't questioned if Christ had been resurrected, just a general question about anyone else, so he starts with the "if" clause, "If Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead . . ." as an attention-getter, and no doubt it was. He goes back to his comparison of Adam and Christ – death came in by Adam, life through Christ Jesus.

1. What do you think Paul means by "first fruits" with regard to Christ? *Hint: The resurrected Christ is referred to as the first fruits. Remember that in sacrifices the first fruits sanctified the whole crop by giving God the first of the crop. (Who then would be the "whole crop" in this metaphor of Jesus Christ as first fruits?)

2. What is your take-away on vss.36-38? What image do those verses lift up to help us grapple with the idea of life after death?

3. In vss. 54 Paul quote Isaiah and in 55 he quotes Hosea. For what purpose does Paul use these quotations?

Saturday, July 25 – 1 Cor 16

It's clear that they already know about the offering Paul is taking for the church in Jerusalem – he's doing a little business with them.

1. In vss. 13-14, as he begins closing the letter, what does Paul tell the Corinthians to do?
2. Who are the people Paul singles out to mention? Why for each one?
3. Vs. 20 says to greet each other with a "holy kiss." Why do you suppose he designates the kiss with the word *holy*? (Maybe two reasons)
4. Paul ends with what is called an enforcement formula and then a concluding grace note. What are each of these?