

## First Epistle to the Corinthians

### 1 – Background and Introduction

1. Historical background
  - a. Old Greek city of Corinth destroyed by Roman consul Mummius in 146 BCE
  - b. Julius Caesar rebuilds Corinth as a Roman colony, 44 BCE
    - i. Populated by poor freedmen
  - c. Augustus appoints Corinth capital of Roman province of Achaia, 27 BCE
  - d. Claudius returns control of Corinth to the Senate, 44 CE
2. Socio-economic background
  - a. A wealthy city
  - b. Located on isthmus separating Asia (Cenchraea) and Italy (Lechaemum); two ports
    - i. Ships would portage the 6km between seas rather than risk southern sea journey
  - c. Economy based on trade, travel, banking, bronze making, and biennial Isthmian games
  - d. Highly conscious of status and status differences
  - e. Greek history and two nearby ports contributed to a sexually permissive society
3. Religious background
  - a. Diversity: Apollo, Athena, Poseidon, Hera, Aphrodite, Heracles, Jupiter, Capitoline, Asklepios, Isis, and Serapis
    - i. “The author Pausanias wrote about Corinth in the mid-second century a.d., his description of the city read like a tour guide of pagan monumental sacred sites” (ESVSB)
  - b. A Jewish settlement and synagogue
  - c. Christian community: probably around 50 persons, meeting in smaller “cells” in houses, occasionally coming together as a whole
    - i. Some members had high social status and wealth; most were “ordinary”
4. Paul’s history with Corinth
  - a. Visits Corinth and stays there for about 1-1/2 years during 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey (ca. 50)
    - i. With Priscilla and Aquila
    - ii. Apollos had been here also
  - b. Writes a letter to Corinthians (lost)
  - c. Letter received from Corinth
  - d. Writes another letter (1 Corinthians, ca. 53-55) while in Ephesus during 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey
  - e. Visits Corinth, challenged, withdraws to Macedonia
  - f. Third and fourth letters to Corinth (forms 2 Corinthians)
  - g. Third visit to Corinth (writes Romans during this time)
5. Literary considerations
  - a. All reputable scholars affirm Pauline authorship
  - b. Traditional interpretive view
    - i. It is an *occasional letter* – Paul is responding to specific issues, writing quickly, addressing each issue in order
    - ii. It is more a practical letter than a theological one
      1. Exhortations and admonitions are Corinthian-specific applications of broader theology
    - iii. Issues presented to Paul provided orally and through a letter from Corinth
      1. Responses to oral questions – chapters 1-6
      2. Responses to written questions – chapters 7-16

- iv. A typical outline (*ESVSB*)
  1. Epistolary Introduction (1:1-9)
  2. Division over Christian Preachers (1:10-4:21)
  3. A Report of Sexual Immorality and Legal Wrangling (5:1-6:20)
  4. Three Issues from a Corinthian Letter (7:1-11:1)
  5. Divisions over Corporate Worship (11:2-14:40)
  6. The Futility of Faith if the Dead are not Raised (15:1-58)
  7. The Collection for the Saints and Travel Plans (16:1-12)
  8. Closing Admonitions and Greetings (16:13-24)
- c. Rhetorical interpretive view<sup>1</sup>
  - i. It is a carefully constructed letter following the Hebrew Prophetic Homily Rhetorical Style
    1. A ring composition; aka, chiasmic or inverted parallelism
    2. Main point appears in the center with echoes of the main point frequently found in the outer segments
    3. Paired sections together form a unit. To try to understand one half of a unit without the other is to miss the complete picture.
  - ii. It is addressed to all Christians, not just the Corinthians<sup>2</sup>
    1. Paul picks some examples of problems in Corinth as a basis to craft a general letter
    2. The topics are not specific to Corinthians, but ones that concern Christians all over
  - iii. The letter is primarily about theology with the examples serving to illustrate theology
  - iv. Outline – five essays, each crafted as distinct entities and together forming an overall theological purpose<sup>3</sup>
    1. **A:** The Cross and Christian Unity (1:5-4:16)
    2. **B:** Men and Women in the Human Family (4:17-7:40)
    3. **C:** Food Offered to Idols (Christian and pagan) (8:1-11:1)
    4. **B':** Men and Women in Worship (11:2-14:40)
    5. **A':** The Resurrection (chapter 15)

By way of summary, it appears that when a long list of problems surfaced in Corinth, Paul selected those of general concern and addressed both the Corinthians and the church at large in a single letter. For this extraordinarily well-constructed, important document Paul reached back into his own Jewish past and co-opted rhetorical styles sanctified by the classical writing prophets. Occasionally his mind moved sideways to bring in related topics, and once in a while he added a few “notes” to a homily readily available in his mind or among his papers.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Based on *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*, by Kenneth E. Bailey, InterVarsity Press, 2011

<sup>2</sup> “Paul addressed 1 Corinthians to the Corinthian Christians ‘together with all those in every place on whom is called the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours’ (1:2, my translation).” Bailey, Kindle location 198

<sup>3</sup> Bailey, loc 228

<sup>4</sup> Bailey, loc 290

## 6. Study resources

- a. Bibles and Study Bibles
  - i. *English Standard Version (ESV)*
  - ii. *ESV Study Bible*
  - iii. *ESV Literary Study Bible*
  - iv. *New English Translation (NET)*, with full notes
- b. Commentaries
  - i. *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*
  - ii. *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary*
  - iii. *InterVarsity Press Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*

There is a difference between what a text says and what the text meant.<sup>5</sup>

## 7. Epistolary introduction (1 Cor. 1:1-9)

- a. Outline A<sup>6</sup>
  - i. Epistolary Introduction to the Letter's Main Themes (1:1–9)
    1. Greeting: apostleship, sanctity, and unity (1:1–3)
    2. Thanksgiving: speech, knowledge, and spiritual gifts (1:4–9)
- b. Outline B<sup>7</sup> - eight divisions
  - i. The Greeting (1:1-3)
    1. **A. God** (His will) / Christ Jesus / Paul & Sosthenes (1:1)
    2. **B. To Corinthians** / (Christ, you) (1:2a)
    3. **B. To all Christians** / (Christ, they) (1:2b)
    4. **A. Grace to you** / From God our Father / & Lord Jesus Christ (1:3)
  - ii. The Prayer of Thanksgiving (1:4-9)
    1. **A. Grace to you** / From God / In Christ (1:4)
    2. **B. Christ sustained** / Among you (now) (1:5-7a)
    3. **B. Lord Jesus Christ** / Will sustain you (then) (1:7b-8)
    4. **A. God is faithful** / Your calling / Christ Son and Lord (1:9)<sup>8</sup>
- c. What does this passage say about \_\_\_\_\_?
  - i. God – four things
  - ii. Jesus – eight things
  - iii. The believing community – eight things

## 8. Details

- a. 1:1
  - i. Paul's defense his apostleship (called)
  - ii. Sosthenes – ruler of synagogue in Corinth (Acts 18:17). No conclusive evidence that the one in Acts and the co-author of this letter are the same, but they may be.
- b. 1:2
  - i. Sanctified – saints: related terms, meaning “set apart”

<sup>5</sup> *Reading Corinthians*, OliveTree e-book [Introduction / Paul's Opponents]

<sup>6</sup> *ESV Study Bible*

<sup>7</sup> Bailey, loc 573

<sup>8</sup> Note also a structure encompassing both the greeting and thanksgiving sections: A (God), BB (believers & Christ) ,AA (grace) BB (believers & Christ) A (God)

1. Paul refers to his recipients as “saints” in spite of all the problems. “Saint” does not refer to some kind of perfected state, or even a good condition, but an identity of a believer in Christ, regardless of the believer’s condition
- ii. “Called to be saints” (alt., “called out as saints”); compare with Paul’s “called by the will of God”
- iii. “Call upon”, an active form is how most translations interpret this phrase, but the verb is passive. “Called by” is more literal and parallels 1:1 better.
  1. It is possible to interpret this phrase “as though the Christians were doing the ‘calling’ ... but it loses the weight of the affirmation that all those ‘sanctified in Christ Jesus’ now belong to the Son of God”<sup>9</sup>
- iv. The three “called” statements emphasize God’s initiative and absence of human effort
- v. Paul emphasizes oneness of Jesus as Lord of both Jews and Gentiles, hinting at a possible source of friction: ethnicity
- c. 1:3
  - i. Grace (Gk., *charis*); Peace (Hb., *shalom*) – Paul’s greeting speaks to both Gentile and Jews in their own traditional greetings
  - ii. God and Jesus are the source and giver of grace and peace; i.e., not racial
  - iii. Paul wants to make sure all differences, racial or otherwise, are reconciled into *shalom*
- d. 1:4
  - i. Traditional letter form includes thanksgiving
  - ii. Emphasis on Jesus as the giver of grace
- e. 1:5
  - i. Speech (tongues) and knowledge were two “gifts” (Gk., *charismata*) particularly valued by Corinthians
  - ii. Emphasis on Jesus as the giver of gifts and the one who provides true “riches”
    1. In addition to racial division, social status may have also been basis for divisions
- f. 1:6
  - i. “Testimony about Christ”; the traditions about Jesus. This was the means by which the Corinthians obtained their grace and their gifts.
    1. Paul appeals to this “tradition” as the foundation of the gospel that was made known to the Corinthians
  - ii. “Confirmed” [Gk., *bebainoo*] is better as “sustained” (parallel to 1:8)
- g. 1:7
  - i. Spiritual gift (Gk., *charismati*)
  - ii. Moves from present to future
- h. 1:8
  - i. “Sustain” [Gk., *bebainoo*] ties this back to 1:6
  - ii. Jesus is sufficient
  - iii. Day of our Lord – Jewish expectation of the day of judgment
  - iv. Saints will be found guiltless – Paul’s expectation for the believers
- i. 1:9
  - i. “God is faithful” – reason why can Paul be so hopeful in spite of present problems in Corinth and elsewhere – it is not human faith that saves, but God’s faithfulness

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<sup>9</sup> Bailey, loc 631

- ii. “By whom you were called” – fourth occurrence. God’s calling is of prime importance to Paul; God is the source of everything good.
- iii. Purpose of grace and gifts are to bring everyone together as one in Jesus Christ

Regardless of all the ethical and theological failings that Paul found in the church in Corinth, he was confident that the Corinthians would stand “guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” O that the antagonists in church fights in every age might maintain this amazing confidence.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bailey, loc 664