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First Letter to the Corinthians

Paul's known contacts with Corinth lasted nearly a decade, and there is more Pauline correspondence to that city than to any other place. Attempts to live according to the gospel in the multiethnic and cross-cultural society at Corinth raised issues still encountered in multiethnic, multiracial, and cross-cultural societies today.

THE BACKGROUND

The mainland of Greece (Achaia) is connected to the large Peloponnesus peninsula to the south by a narrow, four-mile-wide isthmus. On a plateau controlling the isthmus was the city of Corinth. This spot had been settled for more than 4,000 years when the city effectively came to an end through defeat by the Romans in 146 BC. The replacement city to which Paul came in AD 50/51–52 had been founded a century before (44 BC) by Julius Caesar as a Roman colony. With its strategic placement Corinth attracted a cosmopolitan population, and many of them soon became wealthy. The site thrived as a manufacturing (bronze

SUMMARY OF BASIC INFORMATION

DATE: Late 56 or very early 57 from Ephesus (or 54/55 in the Revisionist Chronology).

TO: Mixed church of Jews and Gentiles at Corinth converted by Paul in 50/51–52 (or 42–43).

AUTHENTICITY: Not seriously disputed.

UNITY: Some see two or more separate letters interwoven, but unity is favored by an increasing majority, even if the one letter was composed in disjunctive stages as information and a letter came to Paul from Corinth.

INTEGRITY: No widely agreed-on major interpolations, although there is some debate about 14:34–35 and chap. 13; a lost letter preceded (1 Cor 5:9).

FORMAL DIVISION:

A. Opening Formula: 1:1–3

B. Thanksgiving: 1:4–9

C. Body: 1:10–16:18

D. Concluding Formula: 16:19–24.

DIVISION ACCORDING TO CONTENTS:

1:1–9: Address/greetings and Thanksgiving, reminding Corinthians of their spiritual gifts

1:10–4:21: Part I: The factions

5:1–11:34: Part II: Problems of behavior (incest, lawsuits, sexual behavior, marriage, food, eucharist, liturgy); what Paul has heard and questions put to him

12:1–14:40: Part III: Problems of charisms and the response of love

15:1–58: Part IV: The resurrection of Christ and of the Christians

16:1–18: The collection, Paul's travel plans, commendations of people

16:19–24: Greetings; Paul's own hand; "Our Lord, come."

and terra cotta) and commercial center. Indeed, under Augustus it became the capital city of the province of Achaia.

Although Latin may have been the first language of the Roman colony, inscriptions show wide use of Greek, the language of commerce. Temples honored the standard Greek deities. The Egyptian cult of Isis and Serapis is attested. Homage was given to the emperors. There was a large first-century AD Jewish colony with its own officials and internal management.

Greek Corinth acquired an overblown reputation (partly through slander) for sexual license. Whatever was true of Greek Corinth, Roman Corinth simply had all the problems of a rough, relatively new boomtown adjacent to two seaports. Yet it also had advantages from Paul's point of view. A craftsman like Paul could find work and be self-

supporting there. Because of the many who came and went, he would not be rejected as an outsider or even a resident alien; and the seed of the gospel that he sowed in Corinth might well be carried far and disseminated by those whom he evangelized.

AD 50/51–52. Acts 18 tells of Paul's residence in Corinth for eighteen months.

AD 54–57. From Corinth Paul eventually came to dwell in Ephesus for about three years.

Ca. AD 56. While staying in Ephesus (54–57) Paul got reports about Corinth from “those of Chloe” (I Cor 1:11). We know nothing of Chloe. About the same time or shortly afterward at Ephesus, Paul received a letter from the Corinthians (I Cor 7:1), perhaps in reply to his earlier (now lost) letter and apparently brought by Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16:17–18), who probably added their own reports. Paul then wrote I Cor from Ephesus. He refers to the letter from Corinth and seemingly answers questions that the Corinthians had raised.

GENERAL ANALYSIS OF THE MESSAGE

THE OPENING FORMULA (1:1–3) joins Sosthenes to Paul as co-sender. Seemingly this is the same man, now a Christian, who earlier was the ruler of the Corinthian synagogue and was beaten before the *bēma* when Gallio refused to judge Paul (Acts 18:17). In the first nine verses, including the Thanksgiving (1:4–9), Paul mentions (Jesus) Christ nine times, an emphasis befitting Paul's coming correction of Corinthian factionalism by insisting that they were baptized in the name of Christ and of no other. He also gives thanks that the Corinthians have been given grace enriching them in speech and knowledge and that they were not lacking in any charism—an ironic touch since he will have to castigate them in the letter about their pretended wisdom and their fights over charisms. Paul's letter shows that the situation in Corinth was complicated, but since he does not deal separately with groups of the Corinthians whom he mentions, but integrates his directions to them with his answers to questions that the Corinthians posed in their letter to him, it may be best to understand that the array of issues are facets of the same general problem.

PART I OF THE BODY OF THE LETTER (1:10–4:21). Almost four chapters are addressed to the problem of divisions or factions that exist at Corinth, about which members of Chloe's household have informed Paul. As a result of the coming of other missionaries (especially Apollos), but probably without an incentive from the missionaries themselves, there were now conflicting loyalties among the Corinthian Christians who declared preferences: "'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas [Peter],' or 'I belong to Christ'" (I Cor 1:12). Paul's response may surprise us: All the preachers are only servants (3:5). "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (1:13). "Whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas . . . you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (3:22–23).

In choosing a particular preacher, like Apollos, some Corinthians may have been opting for what sounded like greater wisdom, whereas Paul had preached a foolishness really wiser than human wisdom, namely, Christ and him crucified (1:18–25). Paul laid down a solid foundation, indeed, the only possible foundation, Jesus Christ; and on the day of final judgment everything else that is insubstantial will be shown up and burned off (3:10–15). In a highly rhetorical manner Paul contrasts "us apostles" (4:9) to the proud Corinthians. "Here we are, fools for Christ, while you are so wise in Christ . . ." (4:10–13). This letter is a warning from a father to his children. "Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?" (4:17–21).

PART II OF THE BODY OF THE LETTER (5:1–11:34). Next Paul turns to various problems of Christian behavior among the Corinthians. Apparently *chaps.* 5–6 involve things he has heard about Corinthian Christian practice. The first instance addressed by Paul (5:1–5) involves a man and his stepmother. Apparently, from Paul's perspective, there are inappropriate relations between them. Paul is furious over the situation, but he is equally irate with the church's attitude toward it: "And you are proud." Paul's outrage may betray his Jewish roots, but he bases his argument on the observation that such behavior was not tolerated even among Gentiles. His main concern is not the immorality of the world outside the community but sinfulness within the community

that might leaven it harmfully (5:6–13). Inappropriate pride in the circumstances is symptomatic of sinful corruption in the congregation.

Paul's Jewish distrust of the standards of the pagan world is reflected in his insistence that disputes are to be settled by having fellow Christians act as judges rather than going before Gentile courts (6:1–8) and in his list of vices of which the Corinthian Christians were formerly guilty (6:9–11). In 6:12 we hear a slogan in circulation at Corinth: "For me everything is permissible." Paul qualifies it by insisting that not everything is helpful and that none of our choices must produce mastery over us.

In chap. 7 Paul begins to answer questions posed to him by the Corinthians. The first involves the statement "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." Paul does not encourage abstention from sex within marriage because it could create temptations and effect injustice. He encourages marriage for those who cannot exercise control, even though "I would like everyone to be as I am myself"—single (widower or never married?) and practicing abstinence (7:2–9).

To those already married Paul repeats the Lord's ruling against divorce and remarriage (7:10–11), but then adds a ruling of his own that permits separation when one of the partners is not a Christian and will not live in peace with the believer (7:12–16). In 7:17–40 Paul shows the extent to which his thinking is apocalyptic: he would have all people (circumcised Jew, uncircumcised Gentile, slave, celibate, married, widow) stay in the state in which they were when called to Christ because the time has become limited.

In chap. 8 Paul answers questions about food sacrificed to the gods and then offered in the marketplace. Since there are no gods other than the one God, it is quite irrelevant that food has been offered to gods. Yet pastorally Paul is concerned about weak converts whose understanding is imperfect. One must be careful not to scandalize weak believers. Knowledge, even correct knowledge, can puff up the self, but love builds up others and thus puts constraints on self-serving behavior. (The notion of pastoral limitations on one's rights can be an important challenge to a generation that constantly speaks of rights but not of responsibilities.)

In chap. 9 Paul gives an impassioned defense of his rights as an apostle. Following chap. 8 Paul uses himself as an example of foregoing one's "rights" for the sake of (service to) others. Moreover, it is not insecurity about his status that has caused him to pass over his rights as an apostle. Rather he supported himself and preached the gospel free of charge lest a request for support give the wrong impression that he was preaching for money. Indeed Paul presents the gospel free of charge as his own contribution to the ministry of evangelization.

Chaps. 10–11 deal with more problems at Corinth, predominantly those affecting community worship. Paul warns the Corinthians by using examples from the testing of Israel in the desert that "were written as a lesson to us on whom the ends of the ages have come." In 10:2, 14–22 Paul writes of baptism and of the eucharistic cup of blessing that is a sharing in the blood of Christ and bread-breaking that is a sharing in the body of Christ (10:16). He makes it clear that through baptism and the eucharist God delivers and sustains Christians, yet he also shows that such exalted help does not exempt them from divine judgment. Interrupting the issue of the eucharist, 11:1–16 supplies directions for community "liturgical behavior": a man must pray or prophesy with head bared, while a woman must have her head covered. The basis offered for this demand may not have been deemed fully probative even by Paul himself, for at the end (11:16) he resorts to citing the authority of his own custom and those of the churches.

Then in 11:17–34 Paul returns to the eucharist and the meal in which it was set, bluntly expressing his displeasure with Corinthian behavior. Seemingly some have a meal that precedes the special bread-breaking and cup blessing, while others are excluded and go hungry. *Perhaps* this echoes a social situation where social status informs arrangement of believers into groups—the wealthy dine while the poor go without. That is not Paul's notion of the church of God (11:22); either all should eat together, or they should eat first at home (11:33–34). The whole purpose of the sacred breaking of the bread is *koinōnia* (10:16), not division of the community. Indeed, Paul contends that judgment is already falling on the Corinthians, for some have died and many are sick (11:30).

PART III OF THE BODY OF THE LETTER (12:1–14:40). Chaps. 12 and 14 deal with the spiritual gifts or charisms given in abundance to the Corinthian Christians, while chap. 13, sometimes called a hymn to love, appears as an interruption corrective of any acquisitiveness about charisms. These chaps. have received so much attention that the brief focus here is on just one aspect of what is implied by the picture Paul has painted. Because 12:28 lists apostles, prophets, and teachers as the first charisms, most often the Corinthian community is thought to have been administered by charismatics—that is, those who were recognized to have been given one of those charisms by the Spirit. Yet we know relatively little of how functions were divided and should note that a special charism of “administration” is mentioned in 12:28. (Eph 4:11 lists apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers—suggesting that order and function may not have been exact or uniform.) The idea that in the 50s all the Pauline churches were administered charismatically is risky because of both the lack of information in most of the other letters written at this time, and the reference to bishops and deacons at Philippi (Phil 1:1). Finally, in 14:34–35, immediately after a description of prophecy, women are excluded from speaking in churches; yet 11:5 allows women to pray or prophesy with their head covered. (Some would argue that 14:34–35 is a later interpolation by someone else into Paul’s letter.)

PART IV OF THE BODY OF THE LETTER (15:1–58). Here Paul describes the gospel in terms of the resurrection of Jesus and then draws implications from that for the resurrection of Christians. Some Corinthian Christians have been saying that there is no resurrection of the dead (15:12). In 15:1–11 Paul reminds them of the common tradition that Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to Cephas, the Twelve, 500, James, all the apostles, and finally Paul himself—a tradition totally conformed to the Scriptures and solidly attested: “Whether, then, it was I or they, thus we preach and thus you believed” (15:11). Basing himself on what happened to Christ, Paul contends that all the dead are to be raised (15:12–19), that the resurrection is future (15:20–34), and bodily (15:35–50). There is an eschatological order: first, Christ; then, at his return, those who belong to Christ; then, at the end, when he has destroyed every dominion, authority, and power, and has subjected all

the enemies (with death as the last enemy), Christ hands over the kingdom to the Father. Finally, the Son himself will be subjected to God, who put all things under him so that God may be all in all (15:23–28). Resurrection is not an abstract issue for Paul; rather, the hope of being raised explains his willingness to suffer (15:30–34).

In 15:35–58 Paul concentrates on another objection raised at Corinth to the resurrection of the dead: With what kind of body? Paul gives a subtle answer: a transformed body, as different as the grown plant is from the seed—a body imperishable, not perishable; powerful, not weak; spiritual, not physical; in the image of heavenly origin, not from the dust of the earth. At the end, whether alive or dead, we shall all be changed and clothed with the imperishable and immortal (15:51–54).

BODY CLOSING (16:1–18) AND CONCLUDING FORMULA (16:19–24). The closing of I Cor gives instructions for how the Corinthians are to take up the collection for Jerusalem and outlines Paul's plans. The concluding greetings are warm, but with pen in hand Paul acts as a judge, cursing anyone at Corinth who does not love the Lord (16:22). Still, his last words are positive, extending love to all and uttering a prayer in Jesus' mother tongue (Aramaic *Mārānā' thā'*: "Our Lord, come").

THOSE CRITICIZED BY PAUL AT CORINTH

In chaps. 1–4 Paul corrects factionalism among the Corinthians, not by addressing each group separately but by criticizing the whole community of Christians for allowing themselves to be split up into the three or four groups. There is no evidence that Paul blamed the missionaries whose names designate the factions (Paul, Apollos, Cephas) for encouraging such factionalism, and there is little evidence that these ideas criticized by Paul came from abroad to Corinth.

The words *sophia* ("wisdom") and *sophos* ("wise") occur over twenty-five times in chaps. 1–3, as the wisdom of God (which others consider foolishness) is contrasted with human wisdom. The criticism of Jews and Greeks, both of whom reject the Christ who was the wisdom of God, shows that Paul is not criticizing any one view of human wisdom. While in chaps. 1–4 the word *gnōsis* ("knowledge") occurs only in 1:5, a considerable number of scholars contend that Paul was criticizing a

gnostic movement at Corinth. For evidence they sometimes turn to the later chapters of I Cor, for example, “We all possess knowledge” (8:1) and the discussion of knowledge in 8:7–11—see also 13:2,8; 14:6. Some point to the denial of the resurrection of the dead (15:12,29) as possible evidence of a gnostic influence, and Paul’s remark about saying “Jesus be cursed” (12:3) is also thought to indicate gnostic tendencies. Nevertheless, efforts at identifying a gnostic movement at Corinth, of which Paul is critical, falter on the evidence present in the letter when it is compared with the second-century Gnostic systems that claimed a special revealed knowledge about how recipients possessed a spark of the divine and could escape from the material world.

This leads us into the problem of evaluating a number of slogans in I Cor. “All things are permissible for me” (6:12; 10:23); “Food is meant for the stomach, and the stomach for food” (6:13); “Avoid immorality; every other sin that a person may commit is outside the body” (6:18); “It is good for a man not to touch a woman” (7:1). Paul correctively modifies these slogans, and so those whom he would admonish at Corinth are using them. His modifications raise two possibilities: these statements were coined either by Paul himself (but are now misused) or by Paul’s adversaries (which seems more likely since these slogans do not occur in Paul’s other letters). In either case, one could posit their use in a system of thought whereby superior knowledge leads a group toward libertinism on the principle that the body is unimportant, both as to what one does in the body and to what happens after death.

Other points in Paul’s critique may have nothing to do with a profound theological stance (lawsuits, head coverings); they may reflect nothing more than Corinthian social mores. Although one may suspect that his repeated remarks about the inappropriateness of “boasting” (*kauchasthai*), which remarkably are amplified threefold in II Cor, may identify an activity that itself indicates an attitude capable of generating many forms of destructive behaviors. Nevertheless, appeals to II Cor for clarification of I Cor seek to explain the obscure through the equally obscure, since the actual appearance and temperament of the II Cor opponents are not overly clear.