

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study

1 Corinthians

General Introduction

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is a masterpiece of pastoral theology in which the Apostle to the Gentiles treats a number of issues that have caused difficulties in the Christian community at Corinth. The issues faced by Paul and his Church reflect conditions and issues of the first-century. At the same time they often offer remarkable parallels to issues that confront Christian communities today. Study of the letter provides an opportunity to reflect on what it means to be a community of believers, who share many things but disagree on others. It challenges readers to think about how they relate to the wider world that they fully engage even if it does not always share their values. Finally, the letter provokes readers to imitate Paul's pastoral logic, which probes fundamental convictions to see how they apply in difficult situations.

Circumstances of Composition

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from the city of Ephesus on the west coast of Asia Minor, the headquarters of his missionary activity for several years in the mid 50's of the first century. He wrote to the community in Corinth which he had personally founded several years earlier, at the beginning of the decade, probably 50-52. He had maintained contact with the congregation by letter and through personal emissaries, perhaps people who traveled across the Aegean Sea on business. At several points in the letter Paul alludes to these on-going contacts. At 1 Cor 1:11 he mentions the news brought to him by "Chloe's people" about divisions in the church. These messengers were probably freedmen or slaves in the household of a woman of some means. Later, at 1 Cor 7:1, Paul mentions that he is responding to what the Corinthians had "written about." It may be that Chloe's people had brought him letters with questions about the issues disputed at Corinth.

It is useful to remember the larger context of Paul's ministry at this time. He had been involved in work among Gentiles, i.e., non-Jews for some twenty years. His preaching to them was grounded in his conviction that God, by raising Jesus from the dead, was beginning a new age in his relationship with

humankind. God, who had created the human race, wanted to extend his sovereignty to all humankind and, through the prophets of Israel, had promised to do so at the end of time. The resurrection of God's emissary, Jesus, signaled that those end-times had begun and Paul was engaged in the mission to help bring God's promise to reality. That meant for Paul, that Gentiles could become members of the fellowship of followers of Jesus without becoming Jews. The position was controversial, but had been accepted in principle by the leaders of the community of believers in Jerusalem (Gal 2:1-10). They only asked that Paul and his communities "remember the poor" in Jerusalem. In order to do so Paul was engaged in a fund-raising drive, taking up a collection from all of his congregations to be delivered to Jerusalem. Paul alludes to this process in 1 Cor 16:1-4. He will return to the issue in 2 Corinthians at a later stage of his relationship with the Corinthians.

Paul, then, has a vision of the relationship of all believers in Jesus, whether they be Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, who base their relationship with one another on what God has done for them and who thereby overcome whatever divides them. The divisions and difficulties in Corinth test that vision and threaten the success of the larger project to demonstrate solidarity among all the Christian communities now forming in the eastern Mediterranean region. Much is at stake as Paul responds to the news from Chloe's people and the letter from the Corinthians.

Major segments of the Letter

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| I. | 1:1-2:16 | Divisions at Corinth: Spirit and Wisdom |
| II. | 3:1-4:21 | Paul and Apollos: The Meaning of "Apostle" |
| III. | 5:1-6:20 | Sex and Courts |
| IV. | 7:1-40 | Marriage and Slavery |
| V. | 8:1-11:1 | Idol Meat: To eat or not to eat? |
| VI. | 11:2-34 | The Lord's Supper and Women at Prayer |
| VII. | 12:1-14:40 | Glossolalia: Spiritual Experience and Social Order |
| VIII. | 15:1-58 | The Meaning of Resurrection |