

1 CORINTHIANS: THE BOOK OF UNITY

An Overview

TITLE: Being written to the church at Corinth, this epistle came to be known as *Pros Corinthious A*, which in effect means First Corinthians. The A or alpha, the first letter of the Greek alphabet, was undoubtedly a latter addition to distinguish it from Second Corinthians which shortly followed this epistle.

AUTHOR: That Paul is the author of this epistle is supported by both external and internal evidence. From the first century onward (A.D. 96), there is continuous and abundant evidence that Paul is the author. Clement of Rome speaks of 1 Corinthians as “the Epistle of the blessed Apostle Paul,” in his *Epistle to the Corinthians* and even cited 1 Corinthians in regard to their continuing factions. The internal evidence is obvious. The writer calls himself Paul in several places (cf. 1:1; 16:21 and see also 1:12-17; 3:4, 6, 22).

DATE/SETTING: Paul first preached the gospel in Corinth while on his second missionary journey, about A.D. 50. While there he lived and worked with Aquila and Priscilla who were of the same trade, tent-makers (Acts 18:3). As was his custom, Paul first preached in the synagogue but was eventually forced out by Jewish opposition. However, he simply moved next door to the house of Titius Justus where he continued his ministry (Acts 18:7). Though accused by the Jews before the Roman governor Gallio (a charge that was dismissed) Paul remained 18 months in Corinth (Acts 18:1-17; 1 Cor. 2:3). This letter was written about A.D. 55. toward the end of Paul’s three-year residency in Ephesus (cf. 16:5-9; Acts 20:31). From his reference that he stayed at Ephesus until Pentecost (16:8), it appears he intended to remain there somewhat less than a year when he wrote this epistle.

AUDIENCE:

PURPOSE: To grasp the theme and purpose, a little background is necessary. Corinth was a large metropolis (approximately 700,000; about two-thirds of whom were slaves) located on a narrow isthmus between the Aegean Sea and the Adriatic Sea that connected the Peloponnesus with Northern Greece. And though prosperous with a thriving commerce, from man’s point of view, Paul and his associates may have wondered about what kind of success the gospel of God’s righteousness would have in a city like Corinth. As a city, it had a reputation for gross materialism and deep sinfulness. The city was filled with shrines and temples with the most prominent being the temple of Aphrodite that sat on top of an 1800-foot promontory called the Acrocorinthus. In the earliest Greek literature it was linked with wealth (Homer *Iliad* 2. 569-70) and immorality. When Plato referred to a prostitute, he used the expression “Corinthian girl” (*Republic* 404d). The playwright Philetaerus (*Athenaeus* 13. 559a) titled a burlesque play *Ho Korinthiaste*, which basically means “The Lecher.” Aristophanes coined the verb *korinthiazomai*, “to act as a Corinthian,” which came to mean, “to practice fornication.” According to Strabo much of the wealth and vice in Corinth centered around the temple of Aphrodite and its thousand temple prostitutes. For this reason a proverb warned, “Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth.” From the account in Acts it would appear as if Paul had little fruit among the Jews and that nearly all of his converts were Gentiles. Most of these came from the humbler ranks, although there appear to have been some of the nobler class also (1:26-31). Marked social and economic differences existed among them (7:20-24; 11:21-34); Some of them had even been steeped in pagan vices (6:9-11). Yet as Greeks they prided themselves on their intellectualism, although in their case it had degenerated into a crude and shallow type (1:17; 2:1-5) ...⁴²

One can certainly see, then, how the immoral and religious conditions of Corinth had negatively impacted the life of the church spiritually and morally. The basic theme of the letter is how the Christian’s new life, sanctified in Christ and saints by calling, is to be applied to every situation of life. This new life in Christ

calls for a new way of living through the Holy Spirit (3:16, 17; 6:11, 19-20). God's wisdom manifested to us in Christ is to change believers on both the individual and social level.

Thus, 1 Corinthians was written as a pastoral corrective to the news he had received to the many problems and disorders in the church there. The problems included divisions in the church (1:11), trust in man's wisdom or that of the world rather than God's (1:21-30), immorality (chap. 5; 6:9-20), and a number of questions regarding marriage and divorce, food, worship, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection.

Undoubtedly, because of their religious and immoral background, aberrant beliefs and practices of an extraordinary variety characterized this church.

THEME:

KEY WORDS: A key word in concept is "correction" as Paul sought to correct the problems in Corinth, but "wisdom," contrasting God's wisdom with man's, is also a key word of the book, "Wisdom" occurs 29 times in 22 verses.

KEY PHRASE: "" (six times).

KEY VERSES:

1:18-25. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1:19 For it is written, "*I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will thwart the cleverness of the intelligent.*" 1:20 Where is the wise man? Where is the expert in the Mosaic law? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made the wisdom of the world foolish? 1:21 For since in the wisdom of God, the world by its wisdom did not know God, God was pleased to save those who believe by the foolishness of preaching. 1:22 For Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks ask for wisdom, 1:23 but we preach about a crucified Christ, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. 1:24 But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. 1:25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

1:30-31. He is the reason you have a relationship with Christ Jesus (of Him you are in Christ Jesus), who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 1:31 so that, as it is written, "*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.*"

2:14. The unbeliever (the natural man) does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him. And he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

6:19-20. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? 6:20 For you were bought with a price. Therefore glorify God with your body.

10:12-13. So let the one who thinks he is standing be careful that he does not fall. 10:13 No trial has overtaken you that is not faced by others. And God is faithful, who will not let you be tried too much, but with the trial will also provide a way through it so that you may be able to endure.

KEY NOTE:

KEY LESSON:

CHRIST IN 1 CORINTHIANS: The centrality of Christ as the essence, source, and means of the Christian life is stated in 1:30, "of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us the wisdom of God: both righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption. (my translation).

STRUCTURE:

NUTSHELL OUTLINE: The letter of 1 Corinthians focuses on basic social, moral, and spiritual issues. Among all of Paul's epistles there is none that covers such a wide variety of subjects and problems stretching all the way from those relating to lawsuits, marriage and divorce, meats offered to idols, ministers' remuneration, propriety in worship, celebration of the Lord's Supper, speaking in tongues, belief in the resurrection of the body, to the exercise of Christian benevolence." I would sum up the three main themes as disunity, sexuality, and idolatry.

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