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Introduction to "1 Corinthians"

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1 Corinthians

Some three years after Paul founded the church in Corinth, news reached him in Ephesus that the spiritual condition of the believers in Corinth was deteriorating quickly. Concerned about the situation in Corinth, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to address these problems and to respond to several questions that the Corinthians had asked him in a letter he had earlier received from them.

AUTHOR

Paul identifies himself as the author of the first epistle to the Corinthians (1:1). In 16:21, he states that he signed the letter with his own hand. Throughout the history of the church, Paul has remained unchallenged as the letter's writer.

DATE

The apostle wrote the epistle sometime before Pentecost during his two-and-a-half-year stay in Ephesus (16:8). Before that, he had been in Corinth for some time (Acts 18:18), where he also had an incident involving the proconsul Gallio (Acts 18:12). Based on inscriptions and historical records, Gallio would have been proconsul around the year AD 52, which means Paul would have probably composed 1 Corinthians around the year AD 55 during the apostle's third missionary journey.

AUDIENCE

The majority of the church of Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2) was most likely Gentile (6:9-11; 8:7; 12:2), but it included some Jewish individuals as well (see the mention of synagogues in Acts 18:8 and 17). The church's membership included a variety of social levels. Probably the majority of the believers belonged to the lower social classes (1:26). Yet they also contained some wealthier individuals such as Crispus and Sosthenes, rulers of a synagogue (Acts 18:8, 7), and Erastus, the city treasurer (Rom. 16:23). Most likely, the believers worshipped in house churches, meeting in the homes of wealthier individuals, and from time to time, they gathered together at the house of Gaius (Rom. 16:23).

PURPOSE AND MAIN THEMES

The main reason Paul wrote 1 Corinthians was to address divisions within the church caused by several issues that had sparked quarrels among the believers—a problem reported to him by members of Chloe's household (1:10, 11). The controversies became so great that the church itself wrote to Paul with several questions (7:1), which Paul discusses in the second half of the epistle ("concerning ..." 7:1; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1). The main points of contention he dealt with included among other things:



Date of writing
ca. AD 55

various Christian teachers (Acts 19:1; 1 Cor 1:12; 3:5, 6) led to some members boasting about precedence over the followers of other teachers (4:6); claims of greater spiritual knowledge and power because of food choices (ch. 8) and different spiritual gifts (12:22-31); and immorality (1 Cor 5:9-11; 6:15-18). The apostle's emphasis that Christians were "called to be saints" (1:2) brings all of these themes together. Such holiness should extend to all areas of the believers' lives.

STRUCTURE

Like Paul's other letters, 1 Corinthians follows the characteristic format of ancient Greco-Roman letters. It has an introductory greeting (1:1-3), thanksgiving (1:4-9), and, after the body of the letter, several greetings, and a conclusion (16:19-24). The body of the letter can be divided into two primary sections. In the first six chapters, Paul appears to be addressing the problems that were reported to him in Ephesus from individuals who were part of the household of a woman from Corinth named Chloe (1:11). The second half of the letter is Paul's response to a list of questions the Corinthians had asked him about in a letter they wrote to him (see *Purpose and Main Themes*), a letter that apparently Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus had delivered to Paul in behalf of the church (16:17-18).

When you read through 1 Corinthians, notice how many problems had crept into the church in Corinth over time. Also, when the apostle Paul makes a vehement appeal to the Corinthian believers to a life of purity, that leads to think about areas of life today in which God may also be calling people to be more faithful.

OUTLINE:

- I. Introduction (1:1-9)
 - A. Opening Salutations (1:1-3)
 - B. Praise for Spiritual Growth (1:4-9)
- II. Divisions in the Church (1:10-4:21)
 - A. The Fictious Spirit Rebuked (1:10-13)
 - B. Paul's Defense of His Ministry and the Gospel (1:14-2:16)
 - C. The Inconsistency of a Divisive Spirit (3:1-23)
 - D. The Proper Attitude toward Spiritual Leaders Defined (4:1-21)
- III. Immorality in the Church (5:1-6:20)
 - A. A Case of Incest (5:1-13)
 - B. Lawsuits among Believers (6:1-11)
 - C. Sexual Immorality (6:12-20)
- IV. Instruction on Marriage and Divorce (7:1-40)
 - A. Advice for the Married (7:1-7)
 - B. Advice for the Formerly Married (7:8-9)
 - C. Divorce and Christian Marriages (7:10-11)

- D. Divorce and Mixed Marriages (7:12-16)
- E. Serve God Where You Are (7:17-24)
- F. Advice for the Engaged (7:25-38)
- G. Final Advice for Wives and Widows (7:39-40)
- V. Instruction on Meat Sacrificed to Idols (8:1-11:1)
 - A. Knowledge versus Love (8:1-13)
 - B. Paul and Apostolic Rights (9:1-27)
 - C. A Warning against Idolatry (10:1-22)
 - D. Proper Use of Christian Liberty (10:23-11:1)
- VI. Instruction on Orderly Christian Worship (11:2-12:40)
 - A. Women and Head Coverings (11:2-16)
 - B. Proper Observance of the Lord's Supper (11:17-34)
 - C. The Place and Function of Spiritual Gifts (12:1-14:40)
- VII. The Doctrine of Christ's Resurrection (15:1-58)
 - A. The Resurrection of Christ (15:1-11)
 - B. If Christ Was Not Raised (15:12-19)
 - C. Implications of Christ's Resurrection (15:20-28)
 - D. If the Resurrection Was Not True (15:29-34)
 - E. The Resurrection Body (15:35-49)
 - F. The Eschatological Resurrection (15:50-58)
- VIII. Conclusion (16:1-24)
 - A. The Jerusalem Collection (16:1-4)
 - B. Paul's Travel Plans and the Corinthians (16:5-12)
 - C. Final Exhortation and Greetings (16:19-22)
 - D. Benediction (16:23-24)

ARCHAEOLOGY

Julius Caesar rebuilt Corinth in 44 BC as a Roman colony. The city soon became an important political center, strategically located near ports heading both east and west. The *diolkos*, a paved track connecting the two ports, allowed sailors to haul ships over land areas so that they could avoid the dangerous journey around the Peloponnese peninsula. Commerce and trade flourished. Many of the city's inhabitants were freed slaves and army veterans, all seeking to climb the social and political ladder. The fact that Corinth bustled with opportunities naturally created a highly competitive environment. For example, a certain Erastus, possibly a member of the Corinthian church (Rom. 16:23), left behind the following inscription: "Erastus laid this pavement at his own expense in exchange for the aedileship." Public services, construction projects, and other such acts of generosity offered ways of promoting oneself for political or administrative offices. This competitive mentality of boasting of one's success found

its way into the Corinthian church (4:6, 7; 8:1; 12:25). But Paul makes it clear that if they were true followers of Christ, they would bear the fruit of love, which "suffers long" and "does not envy ... parade itself, is not puffed up" (13:4).

Many in Corinth considered religious devoutness as a means for political stability, economic prosperity, and civil order. In the ancient world, religious and what moderns would regard as secular life were intricately intertwined. The Isthmian games, the Corinthian version of the Olympic games, was one of many significant events that paid homage to the gods. Pausanias, a Greek traveler, visited Corinth in the second century AD and reported as many as 26 religious sites in the city, including temples to Aphrodite, Athena, Isis, Hera, Tyche, Demeter, Asclepios, and Apollo. In such an environment, Paul's warnings against idolatry (8:1-13; 10:23-33) and sexual immorality (6:12-20) were more than necessary. It is easy to understand how the Corinthians ended up with such distortions of the gospel and thus serves as an essential reminder to be aware of cultural influences around that may jeopardize the integrity of the gospel.