

THE LETTERS OF ST. PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS - PART I

BACKGROUND OF THE CORINTHIANS AND INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST LETTER

I Corinth had been a prominent Greek city, which the Romans destroyed in 146 B.C. and rebuilt 100 years later. It was a wealthy city, but had a reputation for laxity.

A. According to Homer it had been founded in the ninth century B.C. Its glory days were in the fifth and sixth centuries B.C., when schools of rhetoric and philosophy flourished and great buildings abounded. Its citizens included the philosopher and teacher Diogenes, who often ridiculed both social conventions and the pursuit of pleasure, power and the like (412-323 B.C.)

B. However, in response to a rebellion against Rome, the general Lucius Mummius Achaicus destroyed it completely in 146 B.C.

C. Julius Caesar, however, rebuilt the city in 44 B.C. and it quickly became a thriving commercial town.

- Corinth once again had access to two ports, one each on the Aegean Sea to the east facing Asia Minor and one on the Iconian Sea leading to Italy in the West. This placement made the city central to trading.

- In addition, it controlled the land route between the northern and southern parts of the province of Achaia, of which Corinth appeared to be the capital. That province was roughly the area of the former city states of Greece, and Corinth was between northern Greece and the Peloponnesus.

D. Because of its favored status, the city had a great deal of wealth and many Roman families were moving in, making the city's population about 100,000 by St. Paul's time.

- However, there were also a very active slave trade and up to two thirds of the people in Corinth were slaves.

- On the cultural front, Corinth was also the site of the Isthmus Games, a major biennial sporting event that may have been the inspiration for St. Paul's comparisons to athletics in these letters.

E. The city had an extremely varied population, with people from all over the known world, which led it to have an openness to

the Gospel, but also to numerous vices.

- There was a great paradox, for the city prided itself on knowledge of the great philosophers, being just to the south of Athens. However, there was a great deal of depravity, including fertility rites and two temples of Aphrodite, that marked Corinth. In an earlier time, Corinth was particularly noted for its decadence, although it is not clear whether that reputation was still around at the time of these letters. Compare Zondervan, Handbook to the Bible 694 (2002) with Fr. O'Connor O.P "The First Letter to the Corinthians" in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary 799 (1990.)

- There were also a large number of Jews there, including the synagogue leader Crispus, who became Christian. See Acts 18:8.

F. The city was damaged during the Greek war of independence (1821-1832) and completely destroyed by a earthquake in 1848. Another city called New Corinth has been built in its place.

II. St. Paul had evangelized this community during his second missionary journey. See Acts 18:1-11.

A. St. Paul had brought the Gospel to Athens in about 50 A.D., with the result that a few people there became Christians, and some others delayed a commitment, and still others scoffed at the idea of the resurrection. See Acts 17:32-34.

B. St. Paul then went to Corinth and stayed there about 18 months.

- With some Christians who had been thrown out of Rome by Claudius, he preached and debated in the synagogue and made some converts. However, opposition led to allegations before the proconsul Gallio, whose term in office was 51-52 A.D. Because the disputes were religious, Gallio deflected them back to the accusers. There was then a riot, during which St. Paul's opponents beat Sosthenes, a synagogue official who was evidently siding with St. Paul. St. Paul then proceeded onto Ephesus and Antioch to complete the journey, apparently taking with him Sosthenes, who appears as a co-author of the first letter.

C. Sometime after he left Corinth on his second missionary journey, St. Paul received reports of problems with that community, especially with regard to factions, rivalries within the church, immorality, and some doctrinal errors among people who denied the resurrection. These reports were the occasion of the first letter, which was written between about 52 and 57 A.D. Most scholars

favor the middle range, perhaps near the beginning of his third missionary journey. The idea would be that he planned to visit the church in Corinth again and intended this letter to raise issues before he did so. In the meantime, before he set forth on his journey, St. Paul sent his two of his assistants St. Timothy and Erastus (who may have been the city treasurer of Corinth, see Rom 16:24), ahead of him. St. Paul refers to sending St. Timothy in the first letter to the Corinthians and as a co-author of the second letter. See 1 Cor. 4:17, 16:10; 2 Cor. 1:1.

D. During his third missionary journey, St. Paul did in fact visit Corinth briefly around 57-58 A.D. as a part of his pastoral visits mostly to churches he established. He apparently had sent at least one letter (and very possibly more) before the canonical letter, which among other things called for an end to ecclesial and moral abuses and asked for donations to the church in Jerusalem. See 1 Cor. 16:1. It appears that when he was in or around Corinth, he discovered a plot to assassinate him and, therefore, changed the plans he had made to continue directly to Antioch, and instead returned towards Jerusalem the way he came. See Acts 20:1-3.

E. It is not perfectly clear when the second canonical letter to the Corinthians was written or even whether it is one letter or a combination of two or more.

1. The letter was written at a time when a visit by St. Paul had been delayed and some Corinthians were apparently angry about it. See 2 Cor. 1:12-2:4. The Corinthians may have thought that St. Paul was, during his third missionary journey, going to sail to Achaia, including Corinth, first and then visit the other churches to the north and east, rather than get to Corinth last. But he wanted to delay the visit to Corinth so that the people there would have time to repent after his first letter and possibly another letter. See 2 Cor. 2:1-4, 7:8.

- However, the letter says that St. Paul anticipates a "third visit" to the Corinthians after this letter arrives. See 2 Cor. 12:14, 13:1. It may be that St. Paul had been in Corinth twice during his second missionary journey. Or it may be that St. Paul wrote this letter after he had left Corinth during the third missionary journey, but had indicated an intention to return soon.

- It also appears that some people were challenging St. Paul's authority, in part by reference to some people calling themselves (or perhaps pejoratively called) super-apostles who came to the community after St. Paul.

- It also appears that the community was becoming too comfortable with the surrounding communities and was thus allowing immoralities into its midst. And those who were resisting that tendency may have been facing the first waves of discrimination.

2. Due to the fact that the tone is harsher in chapters 10-13 and that those chapters use the first person singular, rather than plural which much of the rest of the letter uses, some have argued that it is a separate letter that was attached as an addendum, perhaps the earlier letter referred to in the second and seventh chapters. If so, that part would have been written earlier, perhaps at the beginning of the third missionary journey. Also, due to the rather self-contained nature of chapters 9, and the fact that it repeats some material as chapter 8, some have argued that that part is also a separate letter. Some other theories posit five letters contained in this epistle.

III. The First Letter to the Corinthians deals with the great themes of Church unity, holiness of life, and unity with Christ in the Eucharist and the resurrection.

A. All of these themes deal with the body of Christ in different ways, such as the Church as the Body of Christ, the importance of Christians treating their bodies and lives as joined to Christ, the Body of Christ that is the Eucharist, and the resurrection.

B. The overall structure is sometimes debated, but can be seen in the following terms.

1. The introduction in the first nine verses, which introduces the themes of the church, true wisdom, spiritual gifts, and holiness of life in anticipation of the final judgment.

2. The first major section, which extends through chapter 4, deals with divisions within the church.

- There is a passionate call to avoid all party factions and rivalries, and to think in terms of the wisdom of God, rather than the wisdom of the world, to seek glory in struggles and suffering for Christ, rather than worldly advancement.

3. The next major section, in chapters 5 through 7, deals with moral issues, especially in terms of sexuality and marriage.

- Possibly due to the prevalence of impurities, there is an emphasis on that vice. See 1 Cor. 5:1-8, 6:12-20.

However, the implication is that immorality, such as drunkenness and greed, tear apart the church and are inconsistent with the Christian's call to glory. See 1 Cor. 5:9-6:11.

- On the more positive side, chapter 7 discusses the good of marriage, and the even greater calling to celibacy for the sake of the kingdom. In chapters 5 and 6, St. Paul condemns a false notion of freedom, but here he opposes an excessive rigorism or otherworldliness that would see marriage as at best a tolerated evil.

4. The third major section, in chapters 8 through 10, discusses the sacrifices needed in addition to those that are strictly required in order to be a witness to Christ and a fitting member of His body.

- In the background was the fact that food was often offered in pagan temples to the gods, and then the leftovers were taken back and served at dinners. Because Christians were still dealing with people in the world, they would often be at such dinners, and the question arose of whether they could eat such food.

- St. Paul resolves the matter saying that the eating of the food in itself has no moral implications, but should be avoided if it causes scandal or could be a temptation.

- The overall lesson, which includes a reflection upon his own life, is that one should go beyond what is strictly required and ask what is for the glory of God.

- Chapter 10 contains a transition into the theme of the Eucharist and unity.

5. The fourth major section, in chapter 11, describes the Eucharist and being properly fitted to worship together and received the Eucharist.

- There is a dramatic contrast to the pagan food sacrificed to idols, as described in chapter 10, and the body of Christ offered to us, which must be received humbly, reverently, and with charity.

6. The fifth major section, in chapters 12 through 14, describe the church as guided by the Spirit to be one, while having different members with many varied gifts.

- Prominent in this section are the description of the Church as the body of Christ, see 1 Cor. 12:12-30, and the praise of perfect love (agape) as the controlling principle of the Christian life, with faith and hope and the other greatest virtues. See 1 Cor. 12:31-14:1.

- Chapter 14 also indicates that speaking in tongues had become something of an issue, and that a gift called prophecy was also common. This gift could have been simply a special insight into the faith, not necessarily a prediction of the future. See also Num. 11:29; 1 Thess. 5:19.

7. The final major section, consisting of chapter 15, concerns the Resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the body generally.

- There were probably some Gnostic elements in Corinth, including among Corinthians Christians, who denied the goodness of the body, instead believing it to be a prison of the soul.

- St. Paul strongly insists upon the fact that Christ was truly raised with a glorified human body, and that such a resurrection will be for all people.

- This section is probably last because this Resurrection is the goal of each person, of the world, and of the Church. The section concludes with a triumphant eschatological hymn

8. Chapter 16 is the conclusion, which describes St. Paul's travel plans to come through Macedonia to Corinth.

- This section mentions several prominent early Christians, including St. Timothy to whom two Biblical letters would later be addressed.

