

## 1 Corinthians

Money. Sex. Sport. These were the three great concerns – the three great gods – of Corinthian society, ones which correlate rather well with 21st Century obsessions. Corinth was a kind of Las Vegas of the first century world, the Mecca of worldliness and pleasure-seeking. The verb ‘to corinthianize’ (literally!) meant to act in a debauched, lascivious or abandoned fashion. Given the spiritual temperature of the city, it is not surprising that Paul has some rather serious moral and spiritual issues to address during the course of his letters to the local ecclesia.

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Far more than they might like to admit and far more than ought to be the case, people – even disciples – tend to be products of their time and environment. The world tends to ‘rub off’ on us, and Paul’s letters reveal that it had certainly made its mark in Corinth. The spiritual and moral climate of the city had taken its toll on the brothers and sisters, and in 1 Corinthians alone there are more ‘problems’ for Paul to address than in any other New Testament letter (see the sidebar).

Yet Paul still loved them, and was far from considering them ‘beyond the pail’. He begins, not with chastisement, but with expression of his love and affection, and with prayer. Even in their current state (with so many ‘problems’) he assures them that they have the mind of Christ, and that he will ‘confirm them to the end’ (1:8). There is great practical help and exhortation here in how brethren ought to deal with ecclesias which they believe to be misguided. Paul could never be accused of sweeping over the issues (after all, the Corinthian ‘issues’ seem to make

some of ours pale into insignificance!), but he addresses them in a context which is framed by a genuine love and hope. We need to see to it that there is the same forbearance in our own day. Though Paul clearly advocated disfellowship of the brother who was committing incest until his ways were amended, it is evident that he had not written-off the ecclesia as a whole, nor did he seek to disfellowship it en masse – even though there was such doctrinal and practical error at stake. He sought to work through the issues, not to cast out and dismiss, even though many of the issues in the epistle might well be considered grounds for disassociation in some quarters today.

The church had been established by Paul during his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 18v1-22) after his turbulent visit to Athens. After his ‘intellectual’ or ‘cultured’ approach on Mars Hill, his approach at Corinth was very different – not in words which pander to the wisdom of men, but the simple yet uniquely powerful message of ‘Christ and him crucified’. Paul had spent eighteen months in Corinth preaching and nurturing, so his relationship with many of them was an intimate one.

But it wasn’t long after his departure that the troubles began to emerge. Paul’s next major stop was Ephesus, and while he was there he heard a number of reports of the deteriorating spiritu-

### Corinthians Timeline

- Paul spends 18 months in Corinth and founds the ecclesia (Acts 18:11).
- From Ephesus Paul writes a letter to Corinth, not preserved (1 Cor 5:9).
- Some brethren from Corinth visit Paul in Ephesus and bring a report (1 Cor 1:11)
- Paul receives a letter from the ecclesia (1 Cor 7v1; this letter may be delivered by Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus, or their visit may be independent: 1 Cor 16:17).
- Paul sends Timothy, partly to establish Paul’s authority and to pronounce on some of the troubling matters (1 Cor 4v17). [The order of items 3-5 is not certain. Timothy’s visit in 1 Cor 16:10 may be the same or a second visit]
- Paul writes 1 Corinthians and Titus delivers it.

[This timeline is continued in the forthcoming 2 Corinthians article]

ality, doctrinal and moral health of the young Corinthian ecclesia, and he exchanged correspondence with them and heard reports of a nature which caused him deep concern.

What we know as Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is in fact most probably not the first, although it is certainly the first preserved in the canon of Scripture. 1 Corinthians 5v9-11 refers to an earlier letter of Paul’s, meaning that our ‘1’ Corinthi-

ans is, to the best of our knowledge, the second letter Paul wrote to them. The probable sequence of events and correspondence is set out in the chart. Amongst other things, that first letter includ-

## The Problems

- Disunity / factionalism
- Disrespect of Paul and his apostolic authority
- False doctrine that the resurrection is past
- Meats offered to idols
- Sexual vices: incest, prostitution
- Marriage (inc. unbelievers, divorce, virgins)
- Role of sex in human life
- Wisdom / knowledge and associated pride
- Breaking of Bread etiquette
- Judging of brethren (in the ecclesia and in court)
- Role of sisters: speaking, headcoverings
- Use of Holy Spirit gifts

ed the message that they should disassociate with sexually immoral believers – a message that had sadly been misinterpreted and ignored.

## Questions, Questions

One of the reasons Paul wrote our 1 Corinthians is because the ecclesia had asked his advice. They had sent him a letter (7v1), borne by Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus (16v15-18), which had asked for his view on a number of matters. We can identify these issues because Paul himself identifies them, one by one, in the following passages:

*“Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: it is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.” (7v1-2)*

*“Now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgement ...” (7v25)*

*“Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.” (8v1)*

*“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant.” (12v1)*

*“Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye.” (16v1)*

These verses form the basis of a breakdown of the second half of the epistle (chapter 7 onwards) as Paul proceeds stepwise through the issues which either the ecclesia had raised or which he knew needed to be addressed (from the report of Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus, and probably other sources too). These topics form a grid or framework for chapters 7-16. That said, Paul is never a victim of his own structure; while there are a number of topics which he wishes to address systematically, he is also prepared to let his thoughts and ideas flow – moving seamlessly from one topic to another more or less related one

until he clicks back into his structural grid again.

The waymarks above, then, enable us to identify at least the following blocks of material: 7v1-24 on marriage; 7v25-40 on ‘virgins’ (we could group all of chapter 7 together under the rubric of ‘marriage-related issues’); chs 8-11 broadly on things offered to idols and issues of authority and submission; chs 12-14 on the Spirit and its gifts [this leaves ch 15 ‘hanging’]; ch 16 on the collection for the saints and future arrangements. The letter is then rounded off with the closing salutation.

## Resurrection

So to the famous ‘resurrection’ chapter in 15. There Paul deals with what was probably the most serious threat to the doctrinal (as opposed to practical or moral) health of the young ecclesia. At first glance the chapter appears to be tucked away, somewhat randomly, towards the back end of the set of ‘Now concerning...’ issues that Paul addresses in chapters 7-16. But its placement is probably more deliberate and more artful than that. The final chapter (16) deals with issues and practicalities of the immediate future: how they should take up the Jerusalem collection, how Paul plans to visit them, what to do when Timothy comes, final greetings and benedictions – Paul generally places such matters at the end of his letters as he does here. But immediately prior to that chapter he concludes with the famous resurrection piece. After eight chapters of letting them set the agenda and answering their queries (‘Now concerning those things whereof ye wrote to me...’), Paul is back to decisively setting the agenda himself in chapter 15 by dealing with a matter of fundamental importance. The way he introduces his discussion in formal language highlights its massive significance:

*“Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.” (15v1-2)*

The language is momentous and the pace deliberative. Paul is making a formal declaration – reiterating the things the he had

preached to them. Resurrection is an essential doctrine to which they had previously subscribed and in which they allegedly ‘stood’. It is not a matter of opinion or a side-show to faith’s kernel. Resurrection and its associated doctrines are the Faith. Paul frames the whole discussion with the alternative – life and faith without the doctrine of resurrection is simply a waste of time, a vanity (15v2 quoted above – right at the beginning of the chapter, v10, v14 (twice), v17, and the then again in the last verse, v58).

It has been suggested that the fundamental doctrinal error which Paul counters here underlies many of the other Corinthian ‘problems’. Belief that the resurrection is ‘past already’ brought the corollary that believers had now somehow attained a superior status. They had a special ‘knowledge’ (as resurrected ones) and access to a wisdom and a spirit which surpassed others. They were beyond judgment and beyond immorality (incest, prostitutes, and other vices to which the letter refers), for they were already ‘saved’ and ‘resurrected’, and all things were thus ‘lawful’. Perhaps it takes things too far to propose that the false resurrection doctrine that some of them had espoused underlies all of the issues Paul addresses, but it may lie behind a good number. It certainly seems likely that when Paul introduces the concept of forthcoming judgement in chapter 3 and elsewhere, and when he talks of the end-time, he is implicitly critiquing the false resurrection doctrine that he will unpick explicitly at the end of his letter.

## **The First Half**

Having surveyed the content of chapters 7-16, the part containing clear structural markers, we now need to look at the first 6 chapters. Although the Corinthians had many questions for Paul, it is significant the Paul does not begin his reply with these, for there are other issues to address first, matters which build a foundation for the answers to their more specific enquiries. As human beings living inside our own minds we do not always have the best perspective on our own needs. We might think we know what we need and what questions we should like to have

answered. But it may be that there is a better place to begin, as Paul does here.

Following his introductory salutations and prayers, then, Paul dives straight in to address the issue of factionalism in the ecclesia. The members were evidently so preoccupied in arguing about various matters (probably the very questions of the second half of the letter) – so busy taking sides, rallying for support, and claiming esoteric knowledge – that they didn’t see the nature of the bigger problem of their own disharmony. The breaking down of the unity which they should have shared in Christ was a very serious matter. The unity of the ecclesia is centrally important, but a state which is very hard to achieve. It is sometimes easier to bury oneself in the intensity of controversial issues and the very process of disagreement that the doctrine of unity is forgotten. Paul points out that the taking of sides and aligning oneself with Paul, Apollos, Cephas or Christ (as though they would have been divided!) was utterly inappropriate. This emphasis on unity versus taking sides (and the dangers of pride which often accompany factionalism) is woven throughout the letter. Paul returns to it in 3:3-11, 21-23; 4:6; 11:18-19; 12:25-26 (notice the emphasis on oneness throughout chapter 12).

In chapter 1, though, Paul proceeds deftly from unity to the topic of wisdom. Some of them were laying claim to a superior wisdom, perhaps an intellectual elitism or liberation, not shared

by others (whether within or without). In contrast, in 1:17-3:3 Paul argues that his own preaching was not based on intellectual cleverness, and that the seemingly ‘foolish’ gospel is in many ways opposed to human

wisdom which so often leads to arrogance and the partisan. The true wisdom of God they are not yet mature enough to receive, for they are too preoccupied with worldly thinking (2:6-7; 3:1-3; the wisdom theme comes out again later in chps 3 and 4, eg 3:18; 4:10).

The claims of higher wisdom and the factionalism in the eccle-

### Key Opposites

Each of the following three sets of opposite word families are repeatedly contrasted by Paul and form a key to the epistle.

Wisdom, knowledge	Foolishness, ignorance
Power, strength, authority	Weakness, service

## Paul's Authority

Paul's authority was clearly under attack in some quarters of the Corinthian ecclesia. It's well known that one way of ignoring an unpopular message is to discredit or reject the authority of its bearer, a fact as well known in Corinth as anywhere else. Notice Paul's self-defence and insistence upon his apostolic legitimacy and sincerity in the following list of passages:

- 4:14-21 (and most of chapter 4); 7:10,17,40; 9:1-3,8,16-23 (and much of chapter 9); 11:1-3,16-17,22-23; 14:18,37-38; 15:1-3,10; 16:1.

sia had led to a denial by some at least of the authority of Paul and other apostles. Paul defends this in chapter 4, sometimes with the use of heavy irony (he will develop this ironic technique much more in 2 Corinthians, but it is here in nascent form). The discussion revolves around the status, perception and authority of the apostles, the paradox that they are 'fools for Christ' and yet bearers of authority. But he also brings up the status and self-image of the Corinthians (the one they claim, and the one they ought to have!).

Paul and the apostles have been only too glad to give themselves in service for their converts, including the Corinthians. It is this kind of 'foolishness' and humility that God values, not the arrogant Corinthian boasting. Paul would be only too glad if they were really 'triumphing' in faith, but at the moment their claims of triumph and elitism are only self-deception. And so he admonishes them 'as children' (4:14 cf 14:20 – this was the last way would would have wanted to think about themselves!), and rigorously defends his authority over them in 4:15-21 (notice the 'I' language, and Paul's threat to come with a rod to deal with their waywardness).

*"(I) admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy ... to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?" (4:15-21)*

This stamping of his apostolic authority is the climax of chapters 1-4, and is the basis upon which he now tackles the serious matters of misconduct in the ecclesia – the emergency issues, if you like. First on the agenda is the case of incest, the man who

had his father's wife. Paul makes himself perfectly clear: such practises ought not to be spoken of, let alone tolerated within the ecclesia. The man must be disfellowshipped, and the ecclesia must make 'internal' judgements of this kind. By contrast, it should not resort to judgements in external courts – the next item on Paul's list. Taking one's brother to court, as some were evidently doing, has no place in Christian practise. We have no common ground with those who are without – which is the basis for Paul's next issue, the importance of sexual purity, and the abhorrence of being joined to a harlot. Moral and sexual purity rears its head as an issue at a number of points in the epistle, scarcely a surprise given the decadence of Corinth.

Paul truly had many deeply troubling issues to deal with at Corinth, not least of which was the partial rejection of his own authority which made it all the more difficult to deal with any of them. But the loving way he builds to his 'severe' points, the way he builds his teachings carefully and logically, and the way he frames his letter in the love of Christ and the love of his brethren is a wonderful example to us all in every ecclesial matter with which we must deal.

## Appendix: Extra material

Other possible themes to develop:

Spirit, judgment (condemn), same/one/common chp 12, building metaphors, nearness of end-time

### Further Notes on Chapter 3

Paul then introduces a third topic – the coming judgment (3:13+). As well as being a useful exhortation in its own right, this serves two of Paul's other purposes. First, it demonstrates that there is a future day of reckoning (so the resurrection is not past already!), and second, it means we had better behave appropriately now so as to be ready for it. That means, for instance, no sexual immorality (3:16), something that Paul will take up much more explicitly in later chapters. One of the clever things about these first few chapters is that they appear to address two particular problems (factionalism and pseudo-wisdom), but in the process, Paul provides a foretaste of several of the later themes.

Paul briefly introduces a third topic of the coming judgment and the need for good building / behaviour now in 3v13+ which anticipates his position on resurrection in chp 15. Whatever 'wisdom' we may have in Christ does not obviate the need for leading an appropriate life and preparing for judgment

### Further Notes on Chapters 8-11

Chapters 8-11 are complex and deal with a number of interwoven topics. Paul begins in chapter 8 with the issue they have raised – meats offered to idols. This becomes a springboard for a discussion about 'rights' (the watchwords of the chapter are freedom, power and knowledge). This relates back to chapter 8 because it is true they know that an idol is nothing, that they are free and empowered to eat meats offered to idols. But that doesn't mean they should, especially if their liberty will cause others to sin. Paul has authority as an apostle – he has the right to be funded and live off the gospel, for instance. But he has not exercised that right, even though it is his. He has instead used his freedom to be a servant, becoming all things to all men according to their needs (cf chp 10). Having demonstrated this he can then circle back to the original 'meats to idols' issue (10:33-34). In chapter 11 he deals with issues which seem more miscellaneous (11:3-16: male/female headship hierarchy – although this does relate to the authority theme; 11:17-33: decorum at the breaking of bread – this loosely relates to the theme of eating and sacrifice (meats to idols), and Paul in fact does make the link when he introduces the topic). Paul concludes this section in 11:34 by stating that he will deal with the other matters they have raised when he comes.