

Introduction to 1 Corinthians

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This morning we are beginning a new Series on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians and, as we have not yet looked at this letter together, it will be important for us to spend some time in this first study getting a kind of overview to the whole thing. Hopefully, by taking the time to do this on the front end, you will be better equipped to make sense of the rest of the letter and to see its individual parts in their proper context. And context, as you know, is the single most important factor in understanding any communication and most especially in understanding the Scriptures.

In this overview, we will take a look at 4 things: 1) The Occasion of the letter - and by that I mean the background which shows how this letter came about historically, 2) the Purpose of the letter -i.e., why it was written, 3) the Content of the letter -which, for our purposes at this stage, will be limited to a very broad, brief outline of the major themes and finally, 4) the Relevance of the letter - i.e., how this letter intersects with the church and culture in our own day. That's the plan. Before we go any further, let's pray.

I. The OCCASION of this letter

Now, you might think that the proper place to start thinking about 1st Corinthians would be to start with the letter itself but, in fact, a better place to start is not with Corinthians at all but rather with the Book of Acts. Now why is that the case? Well, because, as many of you will know, in the Book of Acts we have the story of the growth and establishment of the church of Jesus Christ. And a big part of that process, indeed perhaps the biggest part of that process, humanly speaking, involved the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul as God worked through him to further the Gospel throughout much of the then known world.

Now, by reading carefully the Book of Acts, we can discern that Paul made three different missionary "journeys" - each of which took a fairly substantial amount of time as he went from one place to the next. Paul's goal was to leave behind a church in every place - a goal that was not always realized. In some places, that meant a short stay, in other places he stayed as long as three years! But overall, Paul made three "circuits" through various places and returned to visit many of them more than once. Finally, near the end of his life, he made a journey to Rome as a result of his appeal to Caesar during his imprisonment. And that is where Paul's (earthly) story ends.

Now, it was during Paul's second missionary journey (the account of which begins in Acts 15:36) that Paul first went to the City of Corinth and established a church there. This was a very productive and strategic time for Paul as he ministered within three of the most significant cities of that day and age - firstly in Athens, which, as Stott points out, was the *intellectual* center of the world at that time, next he went to Corinth, which was arguably the *commercial* center of the world, and from there, during his third missionary journey, he went on to Ephesus, one of the great *religious* centers of the ancient world. In going to these places, Paul shows that there is a definite agenda and even a definite *pattern* of God's working that repeats itself, as Stott demonstrates:

- 1) In each place there is an attempt to evangelize the Jewish population.
- 2) In each place the response of the Jewish people, on the whole, is to reject the Gospel.
- 3) After this rejection Paul turns his attention to the non-Jews - i.e., the Gentiles.
- 4) Several things happen which demonstrate the rightness of that decision and, more to the point, the sovereignty of God in the midst of this whole process
- 5) And then, finally, while the enemies of the Gospel want to stir up trouble for Paul, in both Corinth and Ephesus, the text records how the Roman authorities dismissed this opposition to the gospel.... thus clearing the way for Gospel ministry to flourish.

So, it was that Paul's coming to Corinth was part of a larger pattern of God sending him to certain influential centers to carry on the work of the Gospel. Immediately prior to his arrival in Corinth, Paul had been in Athens which was by far the biggest and most intimidating place he had been to. And from there he moved on to Corinth, which was equally intimidating, but perhaps for different reasons. In Athens the intimidation would have come from the intellectual climate, in Corinth from the atmosphere of money and power that pervaded the city. The ability of these sorts of places to intimidate even one such as Paul is seen in the letter of Corinthians itself where, at one point, Paul says, "And I was with you in *weakness*, and *in fear*, and *much trembling.....* " (1 Cor 2:3). Certainly there was probably more behind those words than just Paul's context but *clearly* the daunting nature of the city of Corinth played a role in all of that.

But to say such things is to get a little ahead of ourselves. We need to back up a bit and ask the question, "What was Corinth like? What exactly was it that made it such an intimidating place in which to carry out Gospel ministry?"

Well, for starters, as we have already seen, it was a center for commerce and trade in the ancient world. The biggest factor in all of that was its location - in what is now Southern Greece near a narrow strip of land 4.5 miles across that separated the Ionian Sea from the Aegean Sea. Because it was so narrow, ships

would either unload their cargo and have it transported overland to a ship waiting on the other side or, if the ship was small enough, they actually had constructed this track onto which they would lift the ship out of the water - run it along this track overland, and then deposit it on the other side, without ever touching the cargo.

At any rate, because of its strategic location, Corinth was at the center of a lot of commerce. It was sort of like the *Wall Street* of the ancient world, as one commentator describes it. And, because it was that sort of place, it is not surprising to discover that it was populated by all sorts of enterprising, energetic, entrepreneurial, fortune-seeking sorts of people - wealthy people, people of power, and position, and influence. And people who, partly because of their station, often held a pretty high opinion of themselves and their abilities. One reflection of this is seen in some of the comments in Paul's letters to the Corinthians. For example, at one point he says”

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were **influential; not many were** of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the **world to shame the** wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are... (1 Cor. 1:26-28)

Comments such as that reveal not only something about where the bulk of Paul's converts were coming from in Corinth but they also reveal something about the social context in which he was carrying out his ministry - a context which was full of all kinds of people who were, by worldly standards at least, the wise, the influential, and the powerful.

Well, in addition to noting that Corinth was a commercial center, what else can we say about this city? And the answer is: a fair bit. Not only was Corinth known for its business and financial features but it was also a place that had a reputation for sexual promiscuity and all manner of sexual practices. And the source from which most of this stemmed was the particular *temples* and pagan religions to which Corinth played host.

For example, there was a temple for Poseidon/Neptune - The God of the Sea - and Corinth being a port city makes that not too much of a surprise I suppose. The worship surrounding that temple certainly contributed to the atmosphere of materialism and worldliness that gripped the city.

But it was the *other* two prominent temples which played a more significant role in the city's reputation, particularly, as a place of sexual license. At one point in the city's history, there were twin temples - one to Aphrodite or Venus and the other to Apollo. Both of these temples, among other things, were serviced by

male and female prostitutes who engaged in ritualistic sex - thus promoting both heterosexual and homosexual promiscuity.

Now, in making these observations we have to be careful because, as Barrett points out, sometimes the significance of this factor is *overplayed* by commentators and preachers who like to point out, for instance, that the immoral reputation of the city was so great that at one point, the word "Corinthian" - took on a verbal form and was used to refer to all sorts of illicit activity.

Now, on the one hand, that's absolutely true. On the other hand, what is often *not* pointed out is that the city of Corinth about which such things were spoken was completely destroyed and demolished so that the Corinth of *Paul's* day was not the original city with the terrible reputation but in fact the *rebuilt* city of Corinth. This new city was constructed by Caesar in 46 BC, which means that it was about 100 years old by the time Paul entered it. Now, of course, it does seem to be the case that the rebuilt city even in Paul's day had begun to take on its former characteristics, including the re-emergence of the practices associated with the various temples - but, on the whole, it is probably right to say that, as we have already seen, the most prominent feature of the city in Paul's day was its *commerce* and *materialism* and not its *immorality* - although there was certainly plenty of that. So, the city's reputation for sexual activity was A factor, but probably not as prominent a feature as it is sometimes made out to be.

While much more could be said, that, in brief, is the Corinth into which the Apostle Paul walked about 1950 years ago, and which Luke describes for us in Acts 18, verses 1-17..... (read passage here)

Clearly, there are a number of important things to be found in this passage, perhaps the one that stands out the most is found in God's words to Paul in verses 10-11, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I *have many in this city who are my people...*"

Those words crystallize, in a nutshell, the story of the Corinthian church, and of its founding Apostle, Paul. Because it is the story of a Sovereign God, who saved his beloved people through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and who then, at the right time, sent his chosen Apostle to bring the good news of what had been accomplished by Jesus, to the people of Corinth, in order that his *own chosen* people might be called out from among them, and the church be established in that place. From the very beginning that was God's plan and purpose for His church in Corinth and nothing could stand in the way of those purposes.

And we see that, don't we, as we read this brief account in Acts 18. We see the sovereign hand of God at work in many, many ways - We see God sending Paul to minister amongst them, we see God sending Aquila and Priscilla to Corinth

ahead of Paul, in order that they might receive him when he got there. Even further, we see God's purpose in sending these *particular* people because they, in fact, had the same trade and skill as Paul - they were tentmakers - and so were able to provide Paul with room, board and gainful employment which would keep him going while the church was being established.

We see God working in the hearts of some there, early on, including in the hearts of the ruler of the synagogue, Crispus, so that they came to faith - providing Paul with further colleagues in the work and demonstrable evidence of God's intention to establish a church in that place. Beyond all of that we see God speaking personally to Paul, telling him of his plans for the city and how Paul's work will not be hindered and then, right on the heels of that, we see the *illustration* of that truth as Paul's Jewish opponents fail in their attempt at putting a stop to Paul's ministry through some political maneuvering.

So, once again, we see about a year and half's worth of work summarized in just a few verses, but even in that small space we see the hand of God at work, through the agency of his apostle, Paul, to call out and establish His church in Corinth.

Now that's really all we're going to think about with regard to the OCCASION or *background* to this letter. For the remainder of our time I want to very quickly look now at the Purpose, Content and Relevance of the letter.

Now if you're a clock watcher then you might, at hearing me say that, be tempted to panic because we've just taken 15 minutes to get through the first of four sections. However, let me relieve your fears by telling you that the remaining three sections are not *nearly* as involved. So, let's turn now to the letter's *purpose....*

II. The PURPOSE of the Letter

In thinking about the purpose of this letter, it is helpful to understand something of the time line of Paul's dealings with the Corinthian Church. In other words, we have to ask the question: What happened *after* Paul finished establishing the church at Corinth and moved on? Because, you see, it is what happened *after* he left that led to the situation which required his sending them a number of letters, two of which have been preserved for us, by God, as part of our New Testament.

Now, trying to reconstruct the sequence of events that led to the writing of 1 Corinthians requires a lot of detective work: reading through Paul's letters, understanding when he was where and for how long, sometimes reading between the lines and then, after all of that, making some educated guesses. The result is that scholars are not agreed on the precise details of what happened after he left, but a time line which would be supported by many, goes

something like the one offered by a scholar named Plummer:

- a) Paul leaves Corinth, after being there a year and a half Aquila and Priscilla accompany him and they settle in Ephesus, where Paul begins another church plant.
- b) Apollos stays behind and continues the work in the Corinthian church.
- c) Other teachers then arrive in Corinth who are hostile to Paul's ministry, and eventually, Apollos leaves.
- d) Paul, who is only a week's distance away by sailboat, pays a short visit to Corinth to try and combat this hostility that is being promoted against him and his teaching, but is not very successful.
- e) Paul then returns to Ephesus but soon thereafter writes the letter mentioned in 1 Cor 5:9. This is a letter which we do not have, nor has God seen fit to preserve for His church.
- f) Well, that letter gets sent to the Corinthians and, as Paul is ministering away in Ephesus, more bad news arrives from Corinth brought by relatives of a person he knows in Corinth named Chloe. At about the same time he receives a communication back from the Corinthians themselves, with certain questions they would like him to answer.
- g) In response to the reports he has received, and to the letter which they have sent, he sits down and writes the letter which we know as 1st Corinthians.

Now, given that sort of reconstruction, we can say, in very *general* terms, that the purpose of this letter is to address particular *situations* about which Paul has heard and also to answer certain *questions* he has been asked. So, for example, 1 Corinthians 1, verse 11, says this:

My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me...

And then 1st Corinthians 5, verse 1, reads this way:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you...

Here we have two examples of things that Paul has heard about, and which have grieved him, and so he responds to these things by way of letter. Now, flip over to 1 Corinthians 7, verse 1, and you read this:

Now for the matters you wrote about...

And then see Chapter 8, verse 1,

Now about food sacrificed to idols...

And then Chapter 12, verse 1,

Now about spiritual gifts...

It's not hard to see that he is sort of working through this list of questions which the Corinthians have presented to him. So, again, the purpose of Paul's letter is to respond to certain *situations* about which he has heard and to answer certain *questions* which he has been asked.

This means that you have to understand that this letter is not written, in the first instance, as a *theological treatise*. To be sure, there is all kinds of doctrine in the letter, but most of it is *implied doctrine*. But that's one of the great things about 1 Corinthians: it is a great illustration of *applied theology* - *i.e.*, it is a great model of how a Christian ought to bring God's truth to bear upon the details of everyday life.

III. The CONTENT of the Letter

Well, once you understanding something about the *occasion* of the letter and the *purposes* for which it was written, then you are in a position to think about the CONTENT of the letter. Now, as was said at the very beginning, exploring the content of the letter is what we will do each week as we work our way through and so when I say we will "think about the content of the letter" at *this point*, all I am talking about is thinking about the MAIN themes and the MAJOR movements to be found within the letter - sort of the big picture view of 1st Corinthians. What are some of the main themes we will be looking at in this letter?

Well, obviously, given that Paul is responding to certain situations and to certain questions, the themes of the letter are largely controlled by those realities. Thus, as we have already seen, some of the thing discussed include marriage, divorce and sexuality, Christian freedom, Christian meetings, roles and relationships of men and women, spiritual gifts, etc., such that, if I were to try and propose a beginning, *tentative* outline of how these various issues are addressed in this letter, it would look something like this:

Paul Deals with their Reports

1:1-9	Greetings and Thanksgiving
1:10-3:9	Addressing the congregation about their leaders

* What does the Bible say about sex? What kinds of sexual patterns are acceptable to God, and what is NOT acceptable to him?

* How should Christians handle disagreements amongst themselves? Is it ever right to sue someone? How should Christians think about and use the civil courts?

* What is Christian freedom all about? Is it wrong to drink? Is it wrong to smoke? What does the Bible actually say about such things? How should Christians respond to one another when they differ on those, or similar, issues?

* What about marriage? Is it for everybody? What does the Bible say about being single? Is it ever right to divorce? How should the church respond to these things? What about re- marriage, what does the Bible teach about that?

* What about the matter of paying people to do Christian ministry? Wasn't Paul a bi- vocational pastor and, if so, how should that affect the way we think about paid Gospel ministry today?

* How should Christians think about their meetings? What IS worship? What is a worship service? Is there such a thing? When Christians come together, what does the Bible say they are to come together *for*? How should they behave toward one another?

* How should men and women relate to one another in the church and how does that relate to how they interact at home? Is it appropriate for women to teach men in the church? Is God sexist? Is the Bible hopelessly patriarchal and simply a reflection of the culture which produced it?

* What about spiritual gifts? Have gifts like speaking in tongues and prophesying ceased, or not? How are we to respond to these things today, and to those with whom we differ in this regard? What but the other spiritual gifts, what are they and what are they for?

* Did Jesus really from the dead? What is death? Why do *Christians* have to die? What difference does the Resurrection of Jesus make for a person now? What difference does it make after we die?

Now, those are just some of the questions that are raised and addressed by Paul's letter to the Corinthians. If you can sit through a list of questions like that and not see the relevance of this letter for the church in general, and *our church*

in particular - then you better check your pulse.

Well, that is really about it. In closing, let me simply leave you with the words of Gordon Fee, who has written a very fine commentary on this letter. He closes his introduction to the letter in this way:

A final word needs to be said about the considerable importance of this letter to today's church. The cosmopolitan character of the city and church, the [strident or rampant] individualism that emerges in so many of their behavioral aberrations, the arrogance that attends their understanding of spirituality, the [accommodation or compromising] of the gospel to the surrounding culture in so many ways - these and many other features of the Corinthian church are but mirrors held up before the church of today. Likewise, the need for discipleship modeled after the "weakness " of Christ, for love to rule over all, for edification to be the aim of worship, for sexual immorality to be seen for what it is, for the expectation of marriages to be permanent - these and many other things are as relevant to us as to those to whom they were first spoken.

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