

10.1 The First Letter to the Corinthians

Introduction

Many letters like the ones to the Corinthians are called “occasional letters” because they are addressed to specific people because of particular occasions and the specific issues that arose in these situations.

1A. Background to the letter

1B. The founding of the church at Corinth during the 2nd missionary journey

Located in Greece, Corinth was a Roman colony with a Jewish population and synagogue (Acts 18.4). Paul first ministered in this synagogue when he brought the gospel to the Corinthians during his 2nd missionary journey. Acts 18.1-18 gives us a brief run down of Paul’s 18-month stay at Corinth:

^{ESV} Acts 18:1 After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, ³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. ⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. ⁵ When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. ⁶ And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” ⁷ And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. ⁸ Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. ⁹ And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ 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.” ¹¹ And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. ¹² But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, ¹³ saying, “This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.” ¹⁴ But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. ¹⁵ But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things.” ¹⁶ And he drove them from the tribunal. ¹⁷ And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this. ¹⁸ After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila.

Paul then went on to Ephesus and from there to Jerusalem and back to Antioch (ending the 2nd missionary journey): he set sail from Ephesus. ²² When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch (Acts 18.21b-22).

2B. Writing to the church at Corinth during the 3rd missionary journey

1C. Introduction of Apollos

After some time in Antioch, the 3rd missionary journey began (Antioch-Asia-Greece-Asia-Jerusalem): ²³ After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples (Acts 18.23). Before Paul gets to Ephesus, a man by the name of Apollos had come to Ephesus, received good instruction from Aquila and Priscilla, and went preaching to Corinth eloquently proclaiming Christ as Jesus (18.24-28). Thus, when Paul arrives at Ephesus, Apollos is across the sea at Corinth (19.1, And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus).

2C. Correspondence with Corinth and Irregularities of conduct there

1) First, first Corinthians

Paul wrote a letter of instruction to the church that we do not have (1 Cor.5.9, ⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people- ¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler- not even to eat with such a one). Q on canon: what does it mean to say that canon is a subset of what is inspired and what is inspired is a subset of what is revealed? [Hint 1: think three circles each getting smaller like the circles on a target. Hint 2: why is it that not everything that Jesus said is inspired?]. Implication: this leads to a highly significant claim: we cannot come up with criteria

for the determination of the canon; beginning with the fact that we cannot use apostolic authorship and inspiration. On the authority and promise of Christ, canon is self-attesting.

2) Communication to Paul and the reply of First Corinthians

He clarifies (I wrote...not meaning...now I am writing, 1 Cor 5.9-11).

People told Paul about cliques in which following Paul contrasted with following Apollos (For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ"). He had sad reports of divisions at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor.11).

The church wrote Paul a letter: **Now concerning the matters about which you wrote... (7.1)**

2A. Purpose of the letter

It is to meet specific needs reflected in divisions at the church and questions from the church. The picture that emerges is that the gathering of sinners from the nations is hard work, painful effort, and messy business. Truly, through much tribulation, we enter the kingdom of God. Nonetheless, sinner-saints have the cleansing of Christ: ² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you... because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus (1 Cor.1.2-4). Some members of the church (named brothers or sisters, 5.11) may show themselves to not know the Lord as their Lord (1.2). Some baptized people may fall in unbelief like the Israelites of old (1 Cor.10.1-7). Therefore, we are to take heed lest we fall and we have the promise by faith that no trial will be too much to bear (1 Cor.10.13).

Therefore, press on with Christian love (1 Cor. 13), knowing that your efforts and labors in the Lord are not in vain because His resurrection is the first fruit of your resurrection in the final harvest (1 Cor. 15). In other words, Paul's broad purpose is to deal with all the conflicts and questions in the light of the fulfillment in Christ that has brought the gospel promised in the Scriptures to realization.

Thus, it is in the light of fulfillment in Christ and the fullness of the gospel that guides the reader in understanding all the topics of the book, such as:

Divisions, 3

Purity, 5

Marriage, 7

Communion, 11

Spiritual gifts, 12

Love, 13

Resurrection, 15

Giving, 16