

FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

Background

Paul established a Christian community in Corinth about the year 51, on his second missionary journey. Corinth, a commercial crossroads, was a cosmopolitan city full of devotees of various pagan cults and marked by a measure of moral depravity not unusual in a great seaport. The Acts of the Apostles suggests that moderate success attended Paul's efforts among the Jews in Corinth at first, but that they soon turned against him (Acts 18:1-8). More fruitful was his year and a half spent among the Gentiles (Acts 18:11), which brought to the faith many among the poor and the underprivileged (1 Cor 1:26).

Occasion and Purpose

While Paul was in Ephesus on his third journey (1 Cor 16:8; Acts 19:1-20), he received information about the situation in Corinth. The community was displaying open factionalism, as certain members were identifying themselves exclusively with individual Christian leaders and interpreting Christian teaching as a superior wisdom for the initiated few (1 Cor 1:10-4:21).

The community lacked the firmness to take appropriate action against one of its members who was living publicly in an incestuous union (1 Cor 5:1-13). Other members engaged in legal conflicts in pagan courts of law (1 Cor 6:1-11); still others may have participated in religious prostitution (1 Cor 6:12-20) or temple sacrifices (1 Cor 10:14-22).

The community's behaviour was reflected in its liturgy. In the celebration of the Eucharist certain members discriminated against others and denied Christian social courtesies to the poor among the membership (1 Cor 11:17-22). Charisms such as ecstatic prayer, attributed freely to the Holy Spirit, were more highly prized than works of charity (1 Cor 13:1-2, 8), and were used at times in a disorderly way (1 Cor 14:1-40). Still other problems concerned matters of conscience: the eating of meat that had been sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8:1-13), the use of sex in marriage (1 Cor 7:1-7), and the attitude to be taken by the unmarried toward marriage in view of the possible proximity of Christ's second coming (1 Cor 7:25-40). There was also a doctrinal matter: some members of the community, despite their belief in the resurrection of Christ, were denying the possibility of the resurrection of the body. All these problems of which they wanted Paul's advice were brought to his attention.

It was against this background that Paul writes to the community with confidence in the authority of his apostolic mission, and he presumes that the Corinthians, despite their deficiencies, will recognise and accept it. On the other hand, he does not hesitate to exercise his authority as his judgment dictates in each situation. The letter illustrates well the mind and character of Paul. Although he is forced to insist on his office as founder of the community, he affirms that he is only one servant of God among many (1 Cor 3:5-8). He provides us in this letter with many valuable examples of his method of theological reflection and exposition. Certain passages of the letter are of the greatest importance for the understanding of early Christian teaching on the Eucharist (1 Cor 10:14-22; 11:17-34) and on the resurrection of the body (1 Cor 15:1-58).

Authorship and Date

To treat this wide spectrum of questions, Paul wrote this letter from Ephesus about the year 56. Paul's authorship of 1 Corinthians, apart from a few verses that some scholars regard as later interpolations, has never been doubted. Some scholars have proposed, however, that the letter as we have it contains parts of more than one original Pauline letter. We know that Paul wrote at least two other letters to Corinth (see 1 Cor 5:9; 2 Cor 2:3-4) in addition to the two that we now have; scholars believe that the additional letters are actually contained within the two canonical ones. Most commentators, however, favour the unity of the letter and treat it as a single coherent work.

Structure of the First Letter to the Corinthians

1. Greetings and Thanksgiving (1 Cor 1:1-9)
2. Dissensions in the Corinthian Community (1 Cor 1:10-6:20)
 - Divisions in the Church (1 Cor 1:10-4:21)
 - Moral Disorders (1 Cor 5:1-6:20)
3. Answers to the Corinthians' Questions (1 Cor 7:1-11:1)
 - Marriage and Celibacy (1 Cor 7:1-40)
 - Offerings to Idols (1 Cor 8:1-11:1)
4. Problems in Liturgical Assemblies (1 Cor 11:2-14:40)
 - Women's Headdresses (1 Cor 11:3-16)

- The Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34)
- Spiritual Gifts (1 Cor 12:1-14:40)

5. The Resurrection (1 Cor 15:1-58)

- The faith of the Church (1 Cor 15:1-11)
- The Resurrection of the Dead (1 Cor 15:12-34)
- The transformation at the Resurrection (1 Cor 15:35-58)

6. Conclusion (1 Cor 16:1-24)

Themes of the Letter

Called to Be Saints

The basic message of the First Letter to the Corinthians is already announced in the opening greetings in which there is the emphasis on the holiness of life. The Corinthians are to understand that in virtue of their baptism they were sanctified and “set aside” to be holy and to live their lives in Christ. Because of this common call to baptism there is a unity among them and all who “call on the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ”.

You are God’s People

Paul uses the image of “the field” to challenge the Corinthians to depend on God and be at its disposal. Then Paul uses another metaphor, “the building” to underline that the building belongs to God who has constructed it according to His plan and has gifted it with gifts needed for His purposes.

Then Paul introduces another metaphor of “the temple” to remind the Corinthian community and each Christian that we are the place of God’s presence, set apart as something holy and called to be a sign of God and to reflect in their way of living this great privilege. Having said all this Paul deals with a moral aberration among the Corinthian community according to the information he has received. He instructs them on incest, law-suits in pagan courts and adultery and prostitution.

Marriage and Celibacy

Paul answers to the questions put forward to him by the Christians of Corinth concerning sexual relations in marriage. Paul manifests his preference for the celibate state, but does not agree with the tendency of some Christians in Corinth who were escaping from marriage commitments already made with the excuse of their baptism and the pretext of asceticism, sustaining that marriage had no place in the eschatological kingdom. With this attitude there was the danger of depriving marriage of its value. Paul accepts a temporary abstinence from sexual love in marriage provide it is the result of a mutual agreement and for only a period of time for the purpose of having a closer relationship with God.

Regarding to each state of life Paul considers it as a vocation from God: “Only, everyone should live as the Lord has assigned, just as God called each one... Everyone should continue before God in the state in which he was called.” (1 Cor 7:17,24)

The Lord’s Supper and the Gifts of the Spirit

At the time of Paul the Eucharistic celebrations took place in someone’s home. Christians used to bring food and shared it with those taking part in the Eucharistic meal. Some rich members were sharing food with those of their social status leaving out the poorer members. Paul reproaches such divisions among Christians who come together to share Christ’s body and blood and makes them realise that with such behaviour they divide the body of Christ and are therefore not living in holiness.

Then Paul speaks about the gifts of the Spirit. There is a “variety of gifts, but the same Spirit” (1Cor 12). As they are all members of the body of Christ, each person is gifted by God for the edification of the community. Paul mentions several gifts of the Spirit but stresses that the greatest among them is love (1 Cor 13). All the other gifts are authentic only if they are motivated and accompanied by love.

The Resurrection

Some of the Christian Corinthians denied the resurrection of the dead. Paul, referring to this denial, instructs the Corinthians about the resurrection. He first reminds them of the paschal mystery: death, burial and resurrection of Christ as the foundation of our faith. Then Paul deals with the implication that Christ’s resurrection has for the Christians. Christ was raised from the dead to a new life so all those who share in Christ’s life will be raised to life at the end of time.

Missionary Method of Paul

Paul's first letter to the church of Corinth provides us with a clear picture of the life of the Christian community of the first generation. Through it we can have a glimpse both of the strengths and of the

weaknesses of this small group who had accepted the good news of Christ and were now trying to realise in their lives the implications of their baptism.

Paul, who had founded the community and continued to look after it as a father, responds both to questions addressed to him and to situations of which he had been informed. In doing so, he reveals much about himself, his teaching, and the way in which he conducted his missionary task as apostle.

COLUMN

Paul in his own words

The hymn on love

“If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, (love) is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails”. *1 Cor 13:1-8*