

## **1 CORINTHIANS**

### **2) The epistle outlined**

#### **Read the whole Epistle**

The very existence of the church at Corinth was a testimony to the grace and power of God. "The church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Cor. 1: 2; 2 Cor. 1: 1) is an amazing statement. Job asked the question, "who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?" To which he answered, "not one" (Job 14: 4). But his answer should be amended. God did exactly that at Corinth! He had "much people in this city" (Acts 18: 10). We should also remember that the Lord Jesus "came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up" (Luke 4: 16), a place of some ill-repute leading Nathanael to exclaim, "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?", to which Philip replied "Come and see" (John 1: 46). Philip took Nathanael to see a man who "knew no sin", who "did no sin", and "in him is no sin" (2 Cor. 5: 21; 1 Pet. 2: 22; 1 John 3: 5). A "clean" man came out of an "unclean" place.

1 Corinthians deals primarily with local church problems. It has been suggested that many of these arose from the character of the city. In fact the assembly at Corinth has been called 'the church in vanity fair', and it does seem that the environment was beginning to influence the church there. It could be said that the city of Corinth was influencing the assembly politically, philosophically, legally, and morally:

- **Politically.** According to James Hastings (*Dictionary of the Bible*), "The Greeks were famous for factions; their cities could never combine together for long", and "factions" were certainly present in the assembly: "every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ" (1: 12).

- **Philosophically.** Corinth was a Greek city, and inhabitants of Greek cities loved to philosophise. They certainly did this at Athens (Acts 17: 18), and it appears that they did the same at Corinth. Paul therefore emphasises that when he preached he did not use "wisdom of words" (1: 17), or to put it another way, "not with enticing words of man's wisdom" (2: 4). See also 2: 13.

- **Legally.** Leaving aside serious questions of crime and fraud, the Greeks were accustomed to taking smaller matters to arbitration, and believers at Corinth were evidently settling disputes among

themselves in this way. See 6: 1-8.

- **Morally.** Corinth was renowned for its licentiousness. It was a byword for sensuality. The city was given, principally, to the worship of Epathrodite, and "it is said that a thousand devadasis (temple virgins or prostitutes) were kept at the temple of Aphrodite for the service of strangers. Fornication was considered as an act of consecration to the goddess rather than an act of desecration of the body" (J.M.Davies). Paul saw the dangers of idolatry, and warned the believers at Corinth against the associated immorality. See, for example, 6: 9-20. He deals with the question of idolatry from a different point of view in 10: 23-33.

It has been suggested that the problems at Corinth arose from the influence of the world, the flesh, and the devil. See Addendum.

While 1 Corinthians may be divided in different ways, it can be said that the book has two major sections: the first emphasising problems arising from individual members in the assembly (1: 10 - 11: 16), and the second emphasising problems arising in corporate assembly life (11: 17 - 16: 18). This division is suggested with reference to the expression "ye come together" (11: 17, 20; 14: 23, 26 etc). It should be pointed out that the expression "when ye are gathered together" does occur in the first of these two sections (5: 4), but this is in connection with an individual. However, it is certainly worth pointing out that assemblies do comprise individual believers, and therefore the assembly will not rise above the spiritual level of its members. In this connection, we should notice the occurrence of the phrase "among you". See 1: 10-11; 5: 1; 6: 7; 11: 18-19; 15: 12.

The teaching of the epistle may be set out in the following way. After the introduction (1: 1-9), the body of the epistle can be divided, with acknowledgements to J. Sidlow Baxter, into two major sections: **(1) Reproof** (Chapters 1-6); **(2) Replies** (Chapters 7-16). In the first, Paul deals with things he had **heard** about the assembly at Corinth. See 1: 11; 5: 1. In the second he deals with things about which he had been **asked** by the assembly at Corinth. See 7: 1 ("Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me") and the expressions "now concerning" or "now as touching" (7: 25; 8: 1; 12: 1; 16: 1). The order is significant. He deals with things about which he had **not** been asked first!

### **1) REPROOF, Chapters 1-6**

As noted above, Paul deals first of all with the things he had heard about the assembly at Corinth. In this connection, he addresses two reports

which had reached him. He deals with the first report (1: 11) in Chapters 1-4, and the second (5: 1) in Chapters 5-6. The first deals with discord amongst assembly members: the second addresses the need for discipline in the assembly.

***a) The first report, Chapters 1-4***

The first report brought news of ***discord amongst assembly members***. This had been related to him by "the house of Chloe" (1: 11). They had told Paul that various factions existed in the assembly and that these were saying, "I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ" (1: 12). They were glorying in men. The situation is summed up in 3: 21, "Therefore let no man glory in men". To do so is "carnal" (3: 1-4). Chapters 1-4 deal, with the situation:

- ***In Chapter 1***, Paul emphasises that their salvation and calling were divine, not human. That is, they had no reason to glory in men in the matter: "'For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called...that no flesh should glory in his presence" (1: 26-29). Rather, "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (1: 31).

- ***In Chapter 2***, Paul emphasises that the preaching under which they were saved, and the teaching imparted once they were saved, did not reflect human wisdom. Both preaching and teaching found their source in divine wisdom, and were imparted in divine power. There was therefore no reason to glory in men in the matter.

- ***In Chapter 3***, Paul emphasises that those who had been responsible for the establishment and development of the assembly at Corinth were simply servants (3: 5). They were directed and empowered by God whose work it was (3: 7). Again, therefore, there was no reason to glory in men in the matter. Hence, "Therefore let no man glory in men" (3: 21).

- ***In Chapter 4***, Paul emphasises that the final and only assessment of service must be left to the Lord himself (4: 5). The Corinthian believers could not assess service, and rank servants of God according to their assessment. In any case, all ability was God-given, and therefore no credit was due to men. Hence, "what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory as if thou hadst not received it?" (4: 8).

### **b) The second report, Chapters 5-6**

This was a general report, and raised the necessity for **discipline in the assembly**. "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you..." (5: 1). The connection with Chapters 1-4 is clear. The believers at Corinth were very pleased with themselves, but Paul now says in effect, 'Take another look at yourselves'. We should notice the following:

- **In Chapter 5**, Paul emphasises the necessity for assembly discipline. "Put away from among yourselves that wicked person" (v13). In this connection we should notice that although they were prepared to judge Paul (4: 3), they were not prepared to judge evil amongst themselves!

- **In Chapter 6**, Paul emphasises the necessity for self-discipline. In vv.1-8, it is self discipline as far as the believer and his **brother** is concerned. In vv.9-20, it is self-discipline as far as the believer and his **body** is concerned. In connection with the first, notice that although they were puffed up for one against another" (4: 6), and thought themselves "wise in Christ" (4: 10), Paul was obliged to say, "Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you?" (6: 7).

It has been suggested that some had over re-acted to Paul's teaching in connection with the believer and his body (vv.9-20), and that this led to his teaching in Chapter 7, but this does seem unlikely. However this brings us to:

### **2) REPLIES, Chapters 7-16**

As noted above, in this section Paul deals with questions he had been asked by the assembly at Corinth. So "Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me..." (7: 1). See also the expressions "now concerning" or "now as touching" (7: 25; 8: 1; 12: 1; 16: 1) and "Mine answer to them that do examine me is this..." (9: 3).

In this section, Paul deals first of all with matters of **personal** conduct (Chapters 7-9), and then with matters of **assembly** conduct (Chapters 10-16).

#### **a) Personal Conduct, Chapters 7-10**

In this section, he deals with differences that had arisen in connection with Christian liberty. Note the use of the word "liberty" in 7: 39; 8: 9; 10: 29.

- ***In Chapter 7***, Paul deals with ***marriage***. Amongst other things, He deals with the position of “the unmarried and widows” (vv.8, 32), with the position of the “married” in differing circumstances (vv.10-16), and with remarriage (v.39).

- ***In Chapter 8***, Paul deals with ***eating food offered to idols***. “As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one...Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge...” (vv.4, 7), and therefore “take heed lest by any means this liberty of your’s become a stumblingblock to them that are weak” (v.9).

- ***In Chapter 9***, Paul deals with ***entitlement to support***. “Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas? Or I only and Barnabas, have not we power to forbear working...Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel” (vv.5-7, 14).

The principal point in these chapters is that ‘liberty is not license’. In Paul’s own words, “All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient” (6: 12; 10: 23). Although there was liberty for all to marry, for all to eat meats, and for full-time workers to receive support, Paul did not exercise these liberties himself. In Chapter 7, he did not do so to secure greater freedom in service (vv.7-8, 32); in Chapter 8 he did not do so to secure the welfare of a weaker brother (v.13); in Chapter 9 he did not do so to secure his position against criticism (v.15).

But this isn’t the end of the matter. The subject of “liberty” is extended into Chapter 10 where Paul points out that the privileges we enjoy must not lull us into a false sense of security and that we are immune from divine displeasure. Just look at what happened to Israel! Paul illustrates from the Old Testament (see vv.1-11) how a believer could become “a castaway” (9: 27), and concludes: “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall...Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry” (vv.12, 14). This isn’t all. The “liberty” that believers have to eat “those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols” (8: 4) is reintroduced from two new angles (vv.16-33). In the first case, partaking in food offered to idols brings the participants into contact with demon power (vv.16-22), and in the second, it could play havoc with another brother’s conscience (vv.23-33).

To sum up: in our personal conduct, we are to “do all to the glory of God”

and “give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God” (vv.31-32). Paul did exactly that (v.33).

**b) Assembly Conduct, Chapters 11-16**

This section can be summarised as follows: **(i)** disorder in assembly gatherings (chapters 11-14); **(ii)** doctrinal error in the assembly (chapter 15); **(iii)** distribution by the assembly (chapter 16: 1-4).

**i) Disorder in assembly gatherings, Chapters 11-14**

It may come as a surprise to discover that early churches, as early as the apostolic era, were beset by various problems, and that a number of New Testament letters were written to address them. Some of these were internal problems, and we think of 1 & 2 Corinthians particularly here. Paul deals with the rather delicate problem of a fractured relationship in Philippians. Some were external problems, and in this case we think particularly of 1 & 2 Thessalonians, and the severe persecution which faced those believers. It could be argued that the gravest problem of all is addressed in the Epistle to the Galatians where Paul deals with an attack on the great doctrine of justification by faith. In addressing the problems at Corinth, Paul deals with the following:

- ***In Chapter 11: 2-16***, Paul deals with disorders in relation to the headship of Christ. “I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God. Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head...” (vv.3-5)

- ***In Chapter 11: 17-34***, Paul deals with disorders in relation to the Lord’s supper. “When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord’s supper. For in eating every one taketh before other his supper: and one is hungry, and another is drunken...” (vv.20-21).

- ***In Chapters 12-14***, Paul deals with disorders in relation to the gifts of the Spirit.

In this connection we should notice that, in general, **Chapter 12** deals with the way in which gifts have been **provided** (“the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal”, v.7); **Chapter 13** deals with the atmosphere by which they must be **permeated** (love is indispensable, v.2); **Chapter 14** deals with the principles on which they must be **practiced** (“Let all things be done unto edifying...Let all things

be done decently and in order", vv.26, 40).

**ii) Doctrinal error in the assembly, Chapter 15**

The chapter, which deals with the doctrine of resurrection, may be simply divided into two major sections, each dealing with a question. In the first case, ***the fact of resurrection*** was denied (vv.1-34): "How say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?" (v.12). In the second case, ***the form of resurrection*** was questioned (vv.35-58): "But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?" (v.35).

Alternatively, the first major section (vv.1-34) could be rightly entitled '***The resurrection of the Saviour***', and the second (vv.35-58) '***The resurrection of the saints***'.

It has been suggested that the doctrine of the Sadducees had infected the assembly at Corinth. "How say ***some*** among you..." See Matthew 22: 33, "The same day came unto him the Sadducees, which say that there is no resurrection"; Acts 23: 8, "For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit".

**iii) Distribution by the assembly, Chapter 16: 1-4**

"Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye" (v.1); "And when I come, whomsoever ye shall approve by your letters, them will I send to bring your liberality unto Jerusalem" (v.3).

The Epistle concludes with references to Paul's current circumstances, to some of his fellow-labourers, and with greetings. See 16: 5-24.

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**Addendum**

It has been suggested that the problems at Corinth fall into three categories: problems arising from **(1)** the influence of the world; **(2)** the influence of the flesh; **(3)** the influence of Satan.

**1) The influence of the world**

It is suggested that this is particularly observable in Chapters 1-4. The

influence of the world is seen **(a)** in selected leaders (1: 10-16); **(b)** in worldly wisdom (1: 17 - 4: 21).

As to the former: "Every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ" (1: 12). This is answered in the following verse (1: 13). The assembly is not a place where democracy is exercised, but where theocracy is exercised.

As to the latter: the world claims to speak with authority. Notice reference to "the wisdom of this world" (1: 20; 2: 6; 3: 19). Paul deals very thoroughly with worldly wisdom in 1: 18-25. He answers it with two words - "Christ crucified" (1: 23). We should note that this does not refer to the Gospel. The words, "Christ died" apply in this case. The words "Christ crucified" are the condemnation of worldly wisdom. Worldly wisdom put Him outside, and since we died with Him, we do not employ worldly wisdom in His service and in the assembly.

## **2) The influence of the flesh**

It is suggested that this is particularly observable in Chapters 5-7. These chapters deal with moral relationships. Paul deals with the report that "there is fornication among you" (5: 1); with involvement with the temple prostitutes (6: 16); with husband/wife relationships etc. (7: 1-40). Or, in a succinct summary supplied by Justin Waldron, the influence of the flesh is seen in immorality (ch.5); in the defilement of the body (ch.6); in marriage relationships (ch.7).

## **3) The influence of Satan**

It is suggested that this is particularly observable in Chapters 8, 10 and 12. These chapters all deal with the dangers of idolatry with its demonic control. This is highlighted in Chapter 10: "the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils (demons), and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils (demons). Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils (demons): ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils (demons)" (vv.20-21).

In Chapter 12, Paul demonstrates that there are two types of spiritual manifestations: those attributable to the Holy Spirit, and those attributable to Satanic power. It was therefore a matter of great importance that the saints at Corinth should be in a position to discern between divine spiritual manifestations, and others of a totally different source. Hence the need for the gift of "discerning of spirits" (v.10). The importance abides to the present day, but at Corinth there was added



necessity to fully clarify the matter. Tongues were used - excessively so - as Chapter 14 makes clear - and in an atmosphere where so many were evidently participating, it would be easy for all to claim the direction of the Holy Spirit, when in point of fact, their contributions did not derive from Him at all.

In order to provide clear guidance in the matter, Paul compares the way in which the Corinthians had been spiritually influenced in the past, with the way in which they were now spiritually directed. In the past, prior to their conversion, the believers at Corinth had been given to idolatry. Paul uses significant language when describing their spiritual condition at this time: "Ye know that ye were Gentiles **carried away** unto these dumb idols, even as ye were **led**". The words, "carried away...as ye were led", refer back to Ch.10. "What say I then? that the idol is anything, or that which is sacrificed to idols is anything? But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils" (vv.19-20).

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