

First Corinthians

"A Casebook for Pastoral Theology"

Author: Paul of Tarsus, the Apostle to the Gentiles, wrote I Corinthians on his third missionary journey five years after he founded the church there.

DATE & PLACE OF WRITING: Paul wrote the letter we know as "First Corinthians" from Ephesus in the spring of A.D. 55 (54) (I Cor. 16:8). This would have been at the prosperous peak of his work at Ephesus. We also know the time of the year when the letter is written. It is the spring before Pentecost. "Unfortunately," observes A. T. Robertson, "we do not know the precise year, thought it was at the close of his stay of three years (in round numbers) at Ephesus (Acts 20:31). . . One may guess the early spring of A. D. 54 or 55."

OCCASION: Paul established the church on his second missionary journey. He had written the church a letter sometime before the one we call "first Corinthians." This letter is now lost (5:9). The church wrote Paul a letter asking for advice about some pressing matters (7:1). Paul's response is I Corinthians. The church at Corinth was a pastor's worst nightmare. The church was riddled with problems, especially interpersonal relationships, divisions over leadership, incest, marital problems, law suits, impropriety during the Lord's Supper, etc. The Apostle writes from a broken heart. Robertson captures the heart of the Corinthian situation in the following words:

It is clear therefore that Paul wrote what we call I Corinthians in a disturbed state of mind. He had founded the church there, had spent two years there (Acts 18), and took pardonable pride in his work there as a wise architect (I Cor. 3:10) for he built the church on Christ as the foundation. He was anxious that his work should abide. It is plain that the disturbances in the church in Corinth were fomented from without by the Judaizers whom Paul had defeated at the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15:1-35; Gal. 2:1-10). They were overwhelmed there, but renewed their attacks in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-21). Henceforth throughout the second mission tour they are a disturbing element in Galatia, in Corinth, in Jerusalem. Nowhere do we see the conflict at so white a heat as in Corinth. Paul finally will expose them with withering sarcasm (II Cor. 10-13). . . . Factional strife, immorality, perverted ideas about marriage, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection, these complicated problems are a vivid picture of church life in our cities today. . . . If one knows clearly and fully the Corinthian Epistles and Paul's dealings with Corinth, he has an understanding of a large section of his life and ministry. No church caused him more anxiety than did Corinth (II Cor. 11:28).

PURPOSE: 1:10

KEY VERSE: 15:57-58

STYLE: I Corinthians is the most varied in content and style of all the epistles of Paul. The topics discussed lend to this variety. Tenney notes: "Every literary device known to writing is employed in its pages: logic, sarcasm, entreaty, scolding, poetry, narration, exposition—in short, it is written in the same style as Paul would have carried on a conversation with the elders of Corinth had he been present with them. It is

would have carried on a conversation with the elders of Corinth had he been present with them. It is thoroughly informal in its approach rather than being a set essay on theological subjects."

CITY OF CORINTH: was located on a narrow isthmus between the Aegean and the Adriatic Seas. It was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, a port city and wealthy commercial center in what is today the southern half of Greece. In order to escape the violent storms in the near by seas the commercial ships were dragged across the isthmus. Athletic games second only to the Olympics were held in Corinth. And the city had a 20,000 seat outdoor theater. The sexual immorality of Corinth was so internationally well-known that the expression *Korinthiazomai*, "to act like the Corinthian," was descriptive of the immoral condition of the city. It came to mean "to practice fornication." It was the ancient "fat city." Corinth stood for everything that is sinful. The city was the center of immorality with the Aphrodite temple, the Greek goddess of love, and its 1,000 prostitutes who came down into the city from their mountain temple at night.

CHURCH IN CORINTH: Paul founded the church at Corinth in the heart of the business center of Greece on his second missionary journey (A. D. 50-52). In Corinth he lived and worked with Aquila and Priscilla and he preached in the synagogue until opposition forced him to move next door, to the house of Titus Justus. Paul remained in Corinth eighteen months in spite of the fact the Jews accused him before the Roman governor Gallio (Acts 18:1-17; I Cor. 2:3). After leaving, Paul wrote a letter, which has been lost (5:9), but disturbing news about the believers and questions they asked Paul in a letter they sent to him (7:1) prompted the writing of I Corinthians. It was a church with divisions (1:11), immorality (chap. 5; 6:9-20), and questions regarding food, worship, the resurrection.

DIFFICULT PASSAGE:

I Corinthians 7:36-38 is paraphrased by Dr. J. W. Shepard to bring out the true meaning:

But if any man thinks that he is acting in an unbecoming manner toward his unmarried daughter, by withholding his consent to her marriage, if she may be of full age and if it ought to take place thus, let him do what he wishes about giving his consent to her marriage, he does not sin by so doing. Let them (the daughter and her lover) marry. But he who stands firm in his heart not having misgivings as to the (distress or) necessity but has legal authority (vested in the father by Roman law) concerning his own will and has decided this matter in his own heart, to keep his unmarried daughter, he will do well. So that, the conclusion follows, both the one who gives in marriage his own unmarried daughter does well or honorably and the one not giving in marriage will do better in view of the bad environment."

The two Corinthian letters give us a better insight into the problems faced by a pioneer church in the New Testament times.

Title: Introduction to First Corinthians

Series: A Look at the Book

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