

THE LETTERS TO THE CORINTHIANS

Paul came to **Corinth** at the end of his Second Journey. It was a busy port at the bottom end of Greece, in a region with the Roman name of **Achaia**. Paul stayed there for a year and a half, and built up a strong congregation of believers. Circumstances kept him from returning, and in his absence many problems sprang up to blight the cheerful fellowship of the Corinthian **brothers and sisters** (in the New Testament, this is how believers referred to each other, as adopted children of God). The **First Corinthian Letter** was written from Ephesus, on the other side of the Aegean Sea, where Paul stopped for three years of his Third Journey. News of the troubles in Corinth had been brought by members of the household of a sister called Chloe, during a visit to Ephesus (see 1 Corinthians 1:11). Paul was shocked by these revelations. Unable to go to them in person because of his commitments at Ephesus, he decided to write them a strongly worded letter instead.

1 Corinthians

Paul learned that the church in Corinth had become divided into rival groups (incidentally, the Greek word 'ekklesia' which is translated '**church**' in the New Testament always refers to a congregation, not to a building; literally it means 'called out' people). There was one group who claimed they were supporters of Peter, another which said that Paul was their leader, and yet another group that declared they followed Christ. This was dreadful, the Apostle declares. There is only one head to the Christian community. The Apostles and their helpers are only builders, he says, adding extra stones to a foundation. That foundation was Christ. He took them back to the time he first came to them, fresh from his rejection by the philosophers of Athens. There was only one topic he had preached, and that was Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and raised from the dead. *"And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified"* (1 Corinthians 2:1, 2). However popular a particular preacher might be, he was of no importance compared with Jesus himself.

In chapter five, Paul applies himself to a serious problem of immorality in the church. One of the members was reported to have an on-going relationship with his father's wife (probably his step-mother). Yet the congregation allowed this to continue without censure. Here the apostle was emphatic – something must be done. They must hold an assembly of the church, and condemn the unrepentant sinner to be expelled.

Next he tackles a case where two Christian brothers had fallen out, and had gone to law against each other. Surely, he says, this dispute can be settled by an arbitrator within the church.

He returns to the subject of sexual relationships. A prevailing Greek philosophy taught that the body and the soul are separate, so it does not matter what we do with our bodies. Going to bed with a prostitute (common as part of the worship in Greek temples) was therefore harmless. But Paul's view is that our bodies belong to Christ, and must be kept holy. *"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you You are not your own",* he says, *"for you were bought with a price"* (1 Corinthians 6:19). God appointed that sexual relationships should be enjoyed within the marriage bond. To avoid the strains caused by celibacy, it was better to get married. If a man or woman became a Christian but their partner remained an unbeliever, they should continue to live together, unless this would cause strife. And someone whose partner dies is free to be married again, but only to a believer.

1 Corinthians chapter eight examines a question they had sent to him. Is it right, they asked, to eat food which has associations with the temples of the heathen gods? There were many shrines in Greek cities, and people would sit in temple restaurants to chat or conduct their business, meanwhile eating meat that had been offered first to the idols. Even joints on sale in the markets had frequently been re-cycled from sacrifices. Some in Corinth felt that as heathen gods have no real existence, they should sit down, give thanks and enjoy it. Paul's

ruling was significant. What matters, he says, is the effect of your action on other people. If by eating you tempt another sensitive brother to do the same, against his conscience, or if eating makes you appear inconsistent to your beliefs in the eyes of an unbeliever, you should abstain from eating. We all have to make sacrifices to help others to the Kingdom of God. I myself, he explains in chapter nine, have deliberately foregone my right to have my preaching expenses paid, to avoid putting off people who would think I preached for money. We have to be like athletes, who deprive themselves of many pleasures to win a prize in the Games. Being baptised is only the beginning. We have to persevere for a lifetime. All Israel, he says, crossed the Red Sea with Moses, but only two men reached the Promised Land.

Now the Apostle looks at the public assemblies of the church, especially their weekly gathering to remember Jesus by eating bread and drinking wine. He ruled that the sisters should have their heads covered during this time, to symbolise the subservience of the Church to Christ her husband. He protested against their allowing the service to degenerate into a drunken feast. And he was particularly concerned about these meetings being disturbed by noise and disorder.

In the First Century the Apostles were able to confer the power of the Holy Spirit they received on the Day of Pentecost to other believers by the laying on of their hands (see Acts 8:14-17). Paul lists the different gifts in 1 Corinthians chapter 12. Foremost were those which helped the running of the church and its preaching efforts – prophecy, teaching, healing and administration. Bottom of the list came the ability to speak to foreigners in their own language – something with very limited usefulness except to preachers. However, some of the members at Corinth with this gift had been using the Breaking of Bread assembly as an opportunity to show off their linguistic abilities, speaking out loud in a foreign language which nobody in the audience could understand. This must stop, Paul insisted. No one must speak in a foreign language unless he stops to allow the message to be interpreted, and if a prophet had a message to give (in Greek) that must take priority. “*All things should be done decently and in order*”, he concluded (1 Corinthians 14:40).

In the midst of his rules about public assemblies Paul slips in a delightful chapter (1 Corinthians 13), in which he teaches that possessing a Holy Spirit gift was unimportant compared with possessing the quality of love. Christian love is more than sexual attraction, or the love of a mother for a child. It is sacrificing self in order to save others. Maybe we can work miracles, or understand the Bible in original Hebrew or Greek, or even die as martyrs to the faith, but it will mean nothing to God unless we have also acquired love. And he gives a powerful definition of what love means, in practice – patience with others, the forgiveness of wrongs, kindness and humility.

The fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians is a monumental essay about the resurrection of the dead. Chloe’s messengers had brought word that some in Corinth no longer believed there would be a resurrection at Christ’s return. They doubted that a human body coming back to life could inherit an eternal Kingdom. First Paul insists that the resurrection of Jesus himself is absolutely central to the Christian hope. Innumerable witnesses, including the Apostle himself, had seen the risen Christ. Without the empty tomb, none of us can hope for eternal life, for a dead saviour cannot help anyone. Then he explains the process – Christ had risen first, as the forerunner of a great harvest of believers who would rise again at his Second Coming. The bodies we have now will be changed to new, immortal ones, and at the end of the world, when all God’s enemies have been subdued, death itself will disappear forever.

The last chapter of 1 Corinthians deals with Paul’s great project – the Collection for the poor believers in Jerusalem. He wanted the Gentiles to show their solidarity with the Jewish believers by supporting them in this practical way. They should start putting the money on one side now, in a collection box, he suggests, so that it would be ready when he came to see them. Those weekly collections are still observed in congregations of believers today.

Well, dear reader, we have spent some time on this particular book, in order to show what a breadth of wisdom and practical instruction we can glean from Paul's letters. We can eavesdrop on his advice to Christians who lived in a very different world to ours, but pick up lots of lessons which still apply in the twenty first century.

2 Corinthians

It is likely the second letter followed soon after the first. Having sent off his missive, containing some pretty plain speaking, Paul was left worrying what the effect would be. Would the Corinthian believers take his counsel to heart, and amend their ways? Or would they be offended, and turn their backs on him? There was only one way to find out, and that was to send a messenger to Corinth from Ephesus. **Titus** was chosen for this role, which would call for great diplomacy.

Having sent him off, Paul was in an agony of suspense. If only he had a broadband connection, or text messaging! But these belonged to a distant future. After a while he tired of waiting for Titus to return with the news. He decided to leave Ephesus, along with Timothy, his young assistant, and find out for himself. He travelled north to Troas, and found many potential converts there (see 2 Corinthians 2:12, 13), but shut his eyes to this opportunity to preach, and pressed on anti-clockwise towards Philippi and Greece. At some point he met up with Titus travelling in the opposite direction (probably on same Roman road). It was a thrilling meeting. Paul was greatly relieved to learn that the Corinthians still loved him, and had taken the actions he recommended. But Titus reported there were some who questioned his right to lay down the rules, and claimed they were apostles as much as he was. They particularly criticised his decision, relayed by Titus, to visit Macedonia in the north of Greece before coming to see them. They had expected he would sail directly to Corinth from Ephesus, as outlined in his first letter. So Paul sends longsuffering Titus back again to Corinth with a second letter to put matters straight. Hence the Second Letter to the Corinthians.

Paul begins by describing the relentless persecution he had endured at Ephesus from the Jewish leaders. They had tried by fair means and foul to stop him preaching. At times he had narrowly escaped death. Then he deals with their criticism of his change of plan. He had decided to delay his coming, he said, not because he was the kind of man you could not trust to do what he said, but to allow extra time for his first letter to take effect. He was glad they had carried out his recommendations, ejecting the immoral brother from the community, and he had heard from Titus that the sinner had now repented. It was their duty, now, he said, to receive him back and forgive him.

His detractors in Corinth had actually insisted he bring a formal letter of recommendation with him from Ephesus. This hurt. Surely the Corinthian brothers and sisters were a living testimonial to his claim to be an apostle! In a lyrical passage he criticizes the religious Jews (he had been one himself), who venerated the Ten Commandments and thought they were permanent. Paul's work was writing the good news about Jesus, not onto tablets of stone, but onto men's hearts. The Law of Moses admittedly had a glory that could dazzle its readers, like Moses' face after he went into the Tabernacle. But an even brighter glory had now been revealed in the face of Jesus. The gospel was a brilliant light, sweeping away the darkness of Sin. Sadly, the god of this world (Mammon) too often blinded the eyes of unbelievers, and left them in the dark. But he must press on, he said, knowing that everything in this life is temporary, and his reward would come at the Judgment seat of Christ.

Again he reminds them how what it had cost him to bring the gospel to them –

“as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger ...” (2 Corinthians 6:4,5)

Surely they could see he was a genuine apostle, suffering so much?

In chapters eight and nine Paul returns to the subject of the Great Collection. The Macedonians, with whom he was staying as he wrote the letter, had already saved up a generous donation for Jerusalem. The Corinthians had promised a large sum too. They should start saving now, he says, so that they would not have to rush round when he comes. In an important passage about Christian giving, he insists that God rewards a generous giver, and they would not lose out by being generous.

In conclusion, he deals with his detractors at Corinth. He is too polite to name them. But with their slander they were undermining his authority, just as the Serpent deceived Eve into thinking she should listen to him, not to God. They boasted of their credentials, these super-apostles, especially their descent from Abraham. But if they wanted a contest, he could take them on. He would show his superiority, not by human qualifications, but by the things he had endured for the sake of the gospel. Which of those loud mouthed boasters had gone off into the unknown, for no reward other than the satisfaction of saving men and women from eternal death? Once more he lists some of his adventures-

“Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one - I am talking like a madman - with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:23-28).

This summary puts us to shame. How great was this man, for whom to live was to live for Christ his master, and to die was to rest until he saw His face! We must try to follow his example.