

THE FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

● 1. *Who wrote the First Letter to the Corinthians?*

1.1. What does 1 Cor 1:1 indicate about the author of 1 Corinthians?

1.2. Although Paul mentions him as a co-author, there is no indication from 1 Corinthians that Sosthenes made any substantial contribution to the composition of 1 Corinthians. Paul uses the first person singular throughout the letter implying that he is its real author; the nature of Sosthenes' ancillary contribution is impossible to reconstruct. This Sosthenes may be the man from Corinth mentioned in Acts 18:17, who is said to be the synagogue ruler, presumably appointed as the successor to Crispus (In Acts 18:8, Crispus is said to be the synagogue ruler [see 1 Cor 1:14]). If so, then Sosthenes must have become a believer after the incident described in Acts 18:17, whereupon he left Corinth and traveled to where Paul was when he wrote 1 Corinthians. Paul's inclusion of him as a co-author may have been motivated by the support that such a prominent Corinthian believer would lend to his letter. If so, then this suggests that Paul may have had some questions about how much authority he still had among the Corinthians (see 1 Cor 4:18).

● 2. *To whom was First Letter to the Corinthians written?*

2.1. Intended Readers

2.1.1. What does 1 Cor 1:2a indicate about the intended readers of 1 Corinthians?

2.1.2. Although Paul also includes as his intended readers "together with all those who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place" (1:2b), it is obvious from the contents of the letter

that the primary intended readers were the Corinthians. In other words, 1 Corinthians is not a circular letter intended for a general readership.

2.1.3. Corinth was a city situated on the Isthmus of Corinth, about 32 km long and 6-12 km wide, which joined the Peloponnesus to mainland Greece. The port to the north was called Lechaion, and that to the south was Cenchreae. In 146 BCE, because of its rebellion against Rome, the Roman general L. Mummius completely destroyed the city, leveling it. The site remained uninhabited for a century, when the city was re-founded as a Roman colony in 46 BCE by Julius Caesar. The name of the city was Laus Iulia Corinthus ("Corinth, the praise of Julius") (see Appian, 8.136). The new population consisted of veterans from Caesar's legions and Italian freedmen (Strabo, *Geog.* 8.6.23). These were later joined by Greeks and other peoples, including Jews (Philo names Corinth as a city in which Jews were to be found [*Leg. ad. Gaium*, 281, 282]). Corinth became a major center of commerce in the Roman province of Achaia, being situated on the trade route from east to west. Strabo explains the commercial advantage of the city, "Corinth is called 'wealthy' because of its commerce, since it is situated on the isthmus and is master of two harbors, of which the one leads straight to Asia, and the other to Italy; and it makes easy the exchange of merchandise from both countries that are so far distant from each other" (*Geog.* 8.6.20). Rather than sailing around the treacherous Cape Malea, sailors would land at one port and then transport their ships and cargoes across the isthmus by means of the diolkos to the other port. In 29 BCE, Corinth was chosen as the administrative capital of the senatorial province of Achaia, which explains why the Corinthians were able to drag Paul before the proconsul Gallio (Acts 18:12). The city also controlled the Isthmian Games, which drew large crowds to the city.

2.1.4. Paul's unflattering, but necessary observation in 1 Cor 1:26, that among the members of the church there were "not many wise according to the flesh, not many powerful, not many noble," implies that most of the Corinthian believers were from the bottom rungs of the Corinthian social ladder. Yet, 1 Cor 1:26 also implies that some of the earliest believers in the city were from the upper class ("not many" means that some are), which is confirmed by the fact that Paul refers to the wealthy (i.e., the opposite of the "have-nots" [11:22]) at the Corinthian celebration of the Lord's Supper, who function as hosts for the church's meetings (1 Cor 11:17-33). (One of these wealthy Corinthians in whose house the church meets is identified as Gaius, "who shows hospitality to me and the whole church" [Rom 16:23]). In addition, it is clear from what Paul writes that most of the Corinthian believers are gentiles—for the problems that he addresses are largely problems that gentile converts would have—yet there are some Jewish believers (Acts 18:4, 8; see 1 Cor 7:18).

2.5. History of Relationship between Paul and the Corinthian Church

2.5.1. Based on Acts 18:1-18, write a brief account of the founding of the church in Corinth.

A. Acts 18:1-3

B. Acts 18:4-5

C. Acts 18:6-7

D. Acts 18:8

E. Acts 18:9-11

F. Acts 18:12-17

3.1.1. 1 Cor 16:8

3.1.2. 1 Cor 5:9-11

3.1.3. 1 Cor 16:17

3.1.4. 1 Cor 16:12

3.1.5 1 Cor 1:11

3.1.6. 1 Cor 4:18; 11:34; 16:3, 5-7

3.1.7. 1 Cor 4:17; 16:10

3.2. The task now is to situate the events mentioned in 1 Corinthians into the framework of Paul’s life provided by the Book of Acts and then affix a probable *absolute* date to the composition of 1 Corinthians.

3.2.1. In Acts 18:24-19:1-22; 20:31, Luke provides a brief account of Paul’s time in Ephesus during his third missionary journey. It is probably during this period of time that he writes 1 Corinthians, since this is the only time that Paul is in Ephesus long enough to write a series of letters to the Corinthians. According to Acts 19:1, on his third missionary journey, Paul comes to Ephesus, where he remains for three years (Acts 20:31). Before Paul arrives in the city, however, Apollos comes to Ephesus, where Aquila and Priscilla explain to him “the way of God” more fully, which he willingly accepts (Acts 18:24-28). Apollos then goes to Corinth (Acts 18:27; 19:1). Luke de-

4. Where was the First Letter to the Corinthians written?

Based on 1 Cor 16:5-8, 19 where was Paul when he wrote 1 Corinthians?

5. What is the First Letter to the Corinthians?

Outline of 1 Corinthians

A. 1:1-9: This represents the introduction of the letter.

1. 1:1-3: This is the salutation of the letter.

2. 1:4-9: Paul gives thanks to God for the Corinthians.

B. 1:10-15:58: This represents the main body of the letter.

1. 1:10-6:20: In the first part of the letter, Paul deals with the problems in the church reported to him by “those from Chloe.”

a. 1:10-4:21: The first problem is that of divisiveness. The Corinthians were aligning themselves with different leaders in the church, in antagonism to and in competition with other groups.

i. 1:10-17: Paul appeals to the Corinthians to be united, and not to quarrel with one another. They tend towards disunity because of their divisiveness resulting from their identification with various leaders in the church.

ii. 1:18-2:5: In order to counter the divisiveness of the Corinthians, Paul explains that the gospel is actually foolishness and that God’s purpose was to overturn the pride associated with human wisdom with the foolishness of the gospel. The implication is the Corinthians have misunders-

tood the gospel as form of wisdom and their leaders as teachers of wisdom. But when the Corinthians correctly understand the nature of the gospel as foolishness, their boasting and divisiveness will cease. Paul explains that he did not preach the gospel with eloquence or the appearance of wisdom, in order that their faith may rest upon God's power.

iii. 2:6-16: Paul explains further the nature of the gospel. He says that it is in fact a message of wisdom, but only to the mature, among which the Corinthians are not to be counted. It is a hidden wisdom, revealed now by God to whomever He wills by means of the Spirit.

iv. 3:1-23: Paul reprimands the Corinthians for still being immature, proof of which is their divisiveness. He explains that the leaders in the church are nothing more than servants of God and are not objects of allegiance or boasting. He also warns that all work in the church will be judged as to its quality and that the church is the Temple of God, which God will protect against those who seek to destroy it. Finally, he encourages the Corinthians paradoxically to become foolish in order to become wise.

v. 4:1-21: Paul says that the Corinthians ought to regard their leaders as servants of Christ, to whom are entrusted the hidden things of God. The Corinthians should also stop judging their leaders with respect to their relative worth—including and especially Paul—because only God has this right. God will judge only at the appointed time. Paul attempts to deflate the Corinthians, because they view themselves so highly in relation to the apostles, and as a result have become proud and insubordinate towards Paul. He promises to send Timothy and warns that when he himself comes he will not spare those who oppose him.

b. 5:1-13: Paul deals with the problem of a man in the Corinthian church who is having sexual relations with his father's wife. What makes matters worse is that the rest of the church boasts about this, presumably because it is supposed to be an expression of Christian freedom. Paul passes judgment on this man, handing him over to Satan for his physical destruction. He tells the Corinthians not to associate with any Christian who is immoral.

c. 6:1-11: Paul deals with the problem of the Corinthians' taking one another to court. Paul reprimands them for this and tells them to settle all such matters within the church.

d. 6:12-20: Paul deals with another type of sexual immorality. Claiming the right of Christian freedom, some of the Corinthian men are making use of prostitutes, arguing that this is a natural use of the body. Paul considers it incompatible for a man who is a part of the body of Christ to unite himself with a prostitute. Since his body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit and he has been bought with a price, a Christian man ought to honor God with his body.

2. 7:1-15:58: In the second half of his letter, Paul answers questions posed to him in a letter by the Corinthians. It is difficult to reconstruct the exact questions posed by the Corinthians, but likely there is a tone of defiance in their questions.

a. 7:1-40: The Corinthians ask whether it is good for a man not to marry. Paul agrees that it is better not to marry, but qualifies this by saying that not all are able to remain unmarried because

of the possibility of sexual immorality. This is also why a husband and wife should have regular sexual relations. Paul also deals with the question of marriages between a believer and an unbeliever: he lays down the principle that if the unbeliever is willing to remain in the marriage the believer should not seek to be released. Paul adds that it is better to remain in the condition that a person was in when God called him or her.

b. 8:1-11:1: The Corinthians ask Paul about food sacrificed to idols. It seems that they were asking for his agreement that eating meat sacrificed to idols was not only harmless but actually an exercise of a freedom grounded in superior knowledge. Paul agrees with them that they possess knowledge that idols are really nothing, but qualifies this by saying that knowledge puffs up whereas love builds up. He instructs them to forego the exercise of their freedom for the sake of the one whose conscience is weak and does not know that idols are nothing. He uses himself as an example for them to follow: he has certain rights as an apostle, but refuses to exercise these rights for the sake of being a more effective apostle. Using the example of Israel in the wilderness, he then warns the Corinthians not to eat food sacrificed to idols in pagan temples, because this is idolatry, a communion with demons.

c. 11:2-34: In this section, Paul does not answer a question, but deals with another problem in the church: disorders in public worship. First, Paul rebukes the Corinthians for allowing certain women to violate standards of decency with respect to dress. Second, he criticizes the Corinthians for celebrating the Lord's Supper in such a way that the poor are humiliated by not having enough to eat. He explains that the illness and death of some of those in the Corinthian church is God's judgment.

d. 12:1-14:40: The Corinthians ask Paul about spiritual gifts; what exactly is hard to determine. Paul explains that there are many spiritual gifts, but one Spirit, many parts but one body, with Christ as the head. He lists some of the spiritual gifts distributed to the church. He then explains that love must be the principle upon which everything must be done, in particular the use of the spiritual gifts. Finally, Paul instructs the Corinthians to prefer prophecy to speaking in tongues in their public meetings, since the former edifies all, whereas the latter, unless interpreted, edifies only the one who speaks in tongues. He also gives them instruction on how the gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues should be exercised.

e. 15:1-58: The Corinthians probably asked Paul something about the resurrection. It seemed that some in the church were denying the resurrection. Paul explains the centrality of the resurrection to his preaching and their faith. He says metaphorically that Christ is the first fruits of those who have died, so that just as Christ has been raised, so will all believers. He also seems to answer their question about the nature of the resurrection body: it is a spiritual body, unlike all other bodies. God has ordained that in the eschatological future death will be destroyed.

C. 16:1-24: This represents the conclusion of the letter. Paul speaks about the money that he is collecting for God's people, gives some information about his itinerary and possible visits by others, and sends greetings.

6. Why was the First Letter to the Corinthians written?

6.1. General Purpose of 1 Corinthians

6.1.1. What does Paul's pointed comment in 1 Cor 4:18-19 "Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power" indicate about his general attitude towards the Corinthians and the Corinthians' attitude towards him at the time of writing? Based on this how would you interpret Paul's general purpose in writing his letter?

6.1.2. Why would Paul find it necessary to instruct the Corinthians to treat Timothy with respect if he should come to Corinth: "Now if Timothy comes, see that he is with you without cause to be afraid, for he is doing the Lord's work, as I also am. So let no one despise him" (1 Cor 16:10-11)? What does this imply about Paul's relationship with the Corinthian church and his general purpose in writing his letter?

6.2. Specific Purposes of 1 Corinthians

6.2.1. What does 1 Cor 5:9-12 indicate about Paul's purpose for writing 1 Corinthians?

6.2.2. What do 1 Cor 1:11; 5:1; 11:18 indicate about Paul's reason for writing 1 Corinthians? Based on the outline of 1 Corinthians, what were the negative reports that Paul heard about the Corinthians (see 1:10-4:21; 5:1-13; 6:1-11; 6:12-20; 11:2-34)?

6.2.3. What do 1 Cor 7:1; 8:1; 12:1 indicate about Paul's reason for writing 1 Corinthians (see 1 Cor 16:17-18)? What were the questions that the Corinthians asked Paul in their letter to him (see 7:1-40; 8:1-11:1; 12:1-14:40; 15:1-58)?
