

FIRST EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS

Approximate date: 52-55 C.E.

Time period: season of extreme growing pains for the Corinthian congregation, in the midst of idolatry, immorality, and factionalism

Author: the Apostle Paul

Location of author: Ephesus/Asia Minor

Target audience and their location: Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Corinth

People:

Paul, Sosthenes, Chloe's household, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), Crispus, Gaius, Stephanus, Timothy, Barnabas, Fortunatus, Achaïus, Aquila, Priscilla

People mentioned:

Yeshua the Messiah, Moses, Aaron

Places:

Corinth, Galatia, Jerusalem, Macedonia, Ephesus, Achaia, Asia

Key Themes:

confidence expressed by Paul in the Corinthians / divisions or factions present in the Corinthian congregation / foolishness of the Messiah's cross to the world / human wisdom versus godly wisdom from the Holy Spirit / the need to have the mind of Messiah / the initial spiritual growth of the Corinthians via Paul's work, followed by Apollos' work / the comfortable conditions of the Corinthians compared to the persecutions endured by Paul / the need for the Corinthians to mature from being spiritual children to parents / great sexual immorality in the Corinthian congregation / properly keeping the Passover / the need for fellow Believers to judge matters themselves versus taking disputes to civil courts / people thinking that everything they want to do is permissible as Believers / men cohabitating with prostitutes / men and women in marriage / unmarried men and women in pagan Corinth / what to do about meat offered to idols in regard to younger or weaker ones / position of Paul and Barnabas as serving apostles / warnings to the Corinthians from Ancient Israel's Exodus / the freedom of the Believer in Yeshua and his or her right conscience / issues regarding hair and the head in Corinth / proper place of the Lord's Supper / the varied gifts of the Holy Spirit to be present among the saints / the overwhelming need to have a sincere and mature love / the spiritual gifts of prophecy and tongues (languages) / orderly worship in the assembly / the historicity of Yeshua's bodily resurrection / the reality of the future resurrection of deceased Believers / request to set aside an offering to take to Jerusalem

Key Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 1:10, 18-25; 2:9-16; 3:11; 5:1, 7-8; 6:9-12; 7:17-24; 9:19-23; 10:1-11; 11:1; 12:12-31; 13:1-13; 15:12-17; 51-53 / **Greeting and Thanksgiving** (1:1-9); **Disorders Reported to Paul** (1:10-6:20); **Problems Raised by the Corinthians** (7:1-15:58); **Conclusion** (16:1-24)¹

Theological Summary: There is largely no controversy among either conservative or liberal interpreters that the Apostle Paul is the author of the first Epistle to the Corinthians. Paul is plainly identified as being the author in the text (1:1-2; 16:21), even though an unknown Sosthenes is listed as a co-sender. There was no

¹ Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 460-461.

controversy in ancient times surrounding Pauline authorship, which is attested by Clement of Rome, writing the Corinthians in the late First Century: "Take up the epistle of the blessed Apostle Paul. What did he write to you at the time when the Gospel first began to be preached?" (1 *Clement* 47:1).² The Epistle of 1 Corinthians is, in fact, Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, as Paul informed his audience, "I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people" (5:9). This attests to the fact that there was a first letter written by Paul that is likely no longer extant.³ 1 Corinthians is Paul's second out of (at least) three letters, indicating that the group of Corinthian Messiah followers had many problems. Given the diversity of issues that are addressed in 1&2 Corinthians together, there is much to learn about the Apostle Paul and how he handled ministry challenges. Joined together, the Apostle Paul wrote more correspondence to the Believers in Corinth, than any of the other groups he ministered to.

The composition of 1 Corinthians is often dated to sometime between 52-55 C.E., toward the end of Paul's three-year residency in Ephesus (16:5-9; cf. Acts 20:31), and is usually tied to when the edict of Claudius was issued, ejecting the Jews from Rome, as well as when Gallio served in office (Acts 18:2, 12).⁴ This was during Paul's Third Missionary Journey.

It would be extremely difficult to understand the scope of 1 Corinthians, without factoring in a few things about Ancient Corinth, and trying to piece together some model of an ancient historical setting.⁵ In the mid-First Century, Corinth was the chief city in Greece, the capital of Achaia. It had become a major metropolis on the isthmus connecting the Greek mainland with the Peloponnesus. Corinth was a newer city when compared to Athens or Sparta, having a mixed population of both Greeks and Romans.⁶ Corinth was a center of Greek philosophy, but probably not as significant as Athens. Of the twelve temples in Corinth, the major one was dedicated to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love.

Ancient Corinth had a very broad ethnic community. "Egyptians, Syrians, Jews, and Orientals of other races had settled among the earlier Italian and Greek colonists and had brought with them their diverse cultural heritage, their distinctive religious customs, and their differing religious beliefs and practices" (*IDB*).⁷ Some archaeological finds in Corinth have revealed the ruins of temples to Egyptian, Phrygian, and Syrian deities.⁸ Corinth had a sizeable enough Jewish community to have at least one synagogue, where the community of Messianic Believers first met.

More than anything else, Ancient Corinth was known as a place for gross sexual immorality. The verb *Korinthiazomai* (Κόρινθαζομαι) or "to live as a Corinthian" in Greek, had widely become synonymous with "to practice sexual immorality." Not surprisingly, admonitions against fornication are a common theme encountered throughout Paul's letter. "Even at a time when public morality everywhere in the Empire was at a low ebb, Corinth in Paul's day was notorious for lax morals" (*IDB*).⁹ Guthrie makes the further observation, "The Corinthian church was bound to be troubled with many problems arising from the impact of Christianity on its pagan environment...Many of the Christians were as yet undisciplined extremists and needed strong handling."¹⁰

It was at the Corinthian synagogue where the growing community of Messiah followers got its start (Acts 18:4), but for whatever reason or series of reasons, the Believers were ejected from it. Crispus, who was actually the president of the synagogue, left (Acts 18:8), with the new assembly of Believers meeting at the home of Titius Justus next door (Acts 18:7). Certainly, the act of being rejected by the local Jewish community did affect some of the spiritual challenges that this group of people had. Also worthwhile to keep in mind is

² BibleWorks 8.0: Schaff, *Early Church Fathers*.

³ Cf. L. Morris, "Corinthians, First Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 1:776; Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 438-440 Carson and Moo, pp 421-422.

⁴ S.J. Hafemann, "Corinthians, Letters to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 177; Carson and Moo, pp 447-448.

⁵ Morris, "Corinthians, First Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 1:775; Hafemann, "Corinthians, Letters to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 172-173; Stephen C. Barton, "1 Corinthians," in *ECB*, 1314; Carson and Moo, pp 419-420.

⁶ S.M. Gilmour, "Corinthians, First Letter to the," in *IDB*, 1:685; Carson and Moo, pp 426-427.

⁷ Gilmour, "Corinthians, First Letter to the," in *IDB*, 1:685; cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 432.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 433.

that many of the newer Corinthian Believers were drawn from the lower classes of the city (1:26-29),¹¹ which had to have been a major contributing factor to the Corinthians' problems.

Considering Paul's Greek-speaking Corinthian audience, no scholastic claim has ever been made trying to suggest a Hebrew or Aramaic composition for his epistle. There are very few quotations made from the Tanach in this letter, so even the amount of possible Septuagintisms is low. That does not mean that there are not Hebraic overtones or undertones to 1 Corinthians, but other than a few Messianics wishing the letter were written in Hebrew, there is no scholastic or historical proof able to substantiate it. Paul's audience included "Jews with their love of the OT, and pagans who were so dissatisfied with their paganism that they had gone as far as to attend the Jewish house of worship" (Morris, *ISBE*).¹² On the contrary, the fact that Paul wrote this letter in Greek is easily confirmed by noting how all of the people in the Corinthian assembly, especially the Jewish members of his audience, had proper names of Greek and Latin origin: Gaius, Fortunatus, Crispus, Justus, Achaius, Sosthenes, Aquila, Priscilla. It has been said of 1 Corinthians that "The character of the letter has made it one of the fundamental sources for a social description of 'the first urban Christians'" (*EDB*).¹³

It is quite easy to deduce how the Corinthians were very, very spiritually immature (3:1-4). Paul composed the letter of 1 Corinthians to correct them on their sinful behaviors. Paul is forced to rebuke the Corinthians about the factions that have arisen among them (1:11). 1 Corinthians 5 is spent by Paul warning the Corinthians about the dangers of sexual immorality, apparently including some kind of incest. Paul is shocked that the Corinthians are taking their fellow Believers to the pagan Corinthian courts to determine their disputes (ch. 6). Paul also comments about marriage between a man and a woman, and urges some of the unmarried to stay unmarried in light of their circumstances (ch. 7). 1 Corinthians ch. 10 addresses the issue of meat sacrificed to idols, and how Believers must be consciously aware that what they do is being observed by others. Paul issues instruction involving the Lord's Supper (11:17-34). A large amount of instruction is seen in 1 Corinthians chs. 12-14, which are spent analyzing the proper usage of the spiritual gifts, with love being the greatest of them all (ch. 13). Writing to a predominantly non-Jewish audience, originally reared in Greco-Roman religion, ch. 15 lays out the Biblical doctrine of resurrection. Interspersed throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul must spend time defending his spiritual authority.¹⁴

Much of the difficulty, with reading and interpreting a letter like 1 Corinthians, is due to the many factions which were present in Corinth, something detectable by various statements made by the Corinthians (1:12; 3:4).¹⁵ Expositors largely think that in 1 Corinthians, Paul could be responding to a letter sent to him by the Corinthians,¹⁶ or he is at least responding to what he has heard about the Corinthians via courier (1:11).¹⁷ "[1 Corinthians] is not a systematic theological treatise, but a genuine attempt to deal with a concrete living situation, a situation calling for an apostolic pronouncement on more than one topic. So Paul goes naturally from one subject to another, sometimes with little connecting material" (Morris, *ISBE*).¹⁸ "It has been well said that reading 1 Corinthians is like reading someone else's mail" (*ECB*),¹⁹ meaning that any outside reader of 1 Corinthians is largely encountering only one side of a dialogue between two parties.

Concurrent with the dialogue that ensues between Paul and the Corinthians are various Corinthian slogans which appear interspersed throughout the letter, which Paul quotes and then addresses. The most significant of such Corinthian slogans addressed would be *Panta mou exestin* (Πάντα μοι ἔξεστιν), "Everything is permissible for me" (6:12, NIV; cf. 10:23).²⁰ In contemporary 1 Corinthians examination, there has been a

¹¹ Gilmour, "Corinthians, First Letter to the," in *IDB*, 1:686; Hafemann, "Corinthians, Letters to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 173.

¹² Morris, "Corinthians, First Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 1:776.

¹³ Peter Richardson, "Corinthians, First Letter to," in *EDB*, 281.

¹⁴ Morris, "Corinthians, First Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 1:776-777.

¹⁵ Barton, "1 Corinthians," in *ECB*, 1315.

¹⁶ Richardson, "Corinthians, First Letter to," in *EDB*, 281.

¹⁷ Hafemann, "Corinthians, Letters to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 164-167.

¹⁸ Morris, "Corinthians, First Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 1:775.

¹⁹ Barton, "1 Corinthians," in *ECB*, 1314.

²⁰ For a further examination of ancient background and transmission issues from Greek into English, consult the FAQ entries on the Messianic Apologetics website, "1 Corinthians 6:12" and "1 Corinthians 10:23."

renewed interest in what the attire issues were regarding the head (11:1-16), and whether a headcovering garment or hairstyles, that communicated respectability or lewdness, were actually what Paul addressed.²¹ Another issue, especially stirred by the modern debate over women in ministry, concerns the authenticity of verses like 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.²² Various evangelical Christian scholars, like Gordon D. Fee²³ and Philip B. Payne,²⁴ consider these verses to be a later interpolation, and not genuine to Paul's original letter.

Because of various background issues, the factionalism present in Ancient Corinth, and not being aware of some significant academic proposals—the Epistle of 1 Corinthians has presented a challenge to many readers in today's Messianic community. (On some levels, 1 Corinthians might be more difficult for Messianics to understand than Galatians.) When some of the factors like Corinthian slogans being quoted and responded to or refuted are considered, though, 1 Corinthians becomes much easier to comprehend. A looming question, for all interpreters of 1 Corinthians, is weighing to what degree the problem-laden Corinthians really thought that God's Word had a vested authority, and how firmly they needed to be admonished.

For today's Messianic Believers, the Epistle of 1 Corinthians undoubtedly presents us with some huge puzzles to be solved, especially as we strive to properly weigh the original setting and context of the letter, and how important it is to follow God's Instruction. Messianics have tended to appreciate how Paul expected the Corinthians to remember the Passover (5:7-8), but they have tended to struggle with some of the remarks about eating meat sacrificed to idols (10:23-33). Messianics also tend to be a bit perplexed as to why there are not more specific appeals made to the Tanach Scriptures in 1 Corinthians, but this may have been because of the significant presence of libertinism in Corinth, requiring Paul to address various problems by largely using logic alone. There are certainly many lessons to be learned from 1 Corinthians, and undoubtedly as our faith community's engagement level with the epistle improves, so will our spirituality, discernment, and ability to tackle complex spiritual circumstances. All readers of 1 Corinthians can be agreed that the epistle contains many lessons on how *not* to behave.

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²¹ Consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, "Headcovering Garments."

²² D. Georgi, "Corinthians, First," in *IDBSup*, 183; Richardson, "Corinthians, First Letter to," in *EDB*, 282.

²³ Gordon D. Fee, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp 699-708.

²⁴ Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), pp 217-267.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON 1 CORINTHIANS:

1. Of the specific rebukes that Paul issues in 1 Corinthians, which one struck you as being the most important, or requiring some more reflection and study on your behalf?
2. With a cursory understanding of First Century Corinth, describe the problem of sexual immorality that Paul mentions in this letter.
3. What do you think Paul was talking about in relation to eating meat sacrificed to idols? How are we to view this properly today in the Twenty-First Century?
4. Have you ever considered how important it is to understand and comprehend the bodily resurrection of Yeshua the Messiah? What does Paul tell us about Yeshua's resurrection?
5. How might the presence of various slogans in 1 Corinthians, which Paul must quote and then address, change one's reading of difficult parts of the letter?

REFLECTION ON 1 CORINTHIANS' PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading Paul's first (extant) letter to the Corinthians: