

SESSION 3: Corinthians

Four main points

1. Background
2. Theme
3. Issues
4. Application

1. Background

Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:1-2:5; 5:1-13; 6:12-20

2. Theme

Reading: 1 Corinthians 11:2-22; 12:1-6, 27-30; 13:1-13

3. Issues

Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 12-20, 35-38, 42-58

4. Application

Reading: 2 Corinthians 1:3-7; 2:5-11; 4:1-12; 5:16-21; 9:6-11; 12:7-10; 13:11-14

Discussion questions:

Does our local congregation adequately reflect the community in which we are set?

Should Christian worship look/sound/feel similar to or different from worldly entertainments?

1. Background

The city of Corinth was situated on a narrow isthmus between Aegean and Adriatic Seas. It was a cosmopolitan port city, boasting two harbours and a trade centre as well as many taverns and drinking houses. The city received shipping from Italy, Sicily, and Spain, as well as from Asia Minor, Syria, Phoenicia and Egypt. Its eastern port was Cenchrea, located on the Saronic Gulf (Acts 18:18; Rom 16:1); its western harbour was at Lechaenum on the Corinthian Gulf. This proximity to the seas and its nearness to Athens, only forty-five miles to the northeast, gave Corinth a position of strategic commercial importance and military defence. In New Testament times it was capital of the Roman province of Achaia. The athletic games at Corinth were second only to the Olympics.

Corinth was a rich and prosperous city and had many fine buildings. There were large outdoor and indoor theatres, temples, shrines and altars. The Acrocorinth, a steep flat-topped rock on top of which was the acropolis containing a temple to Aphrodite, dominated the city. Corinth had gained a reputation for immorality, not least because of the cult prostitution at the temple of Aphrodite (the goddess of love), which had more than 1000 women prostitutes. To 'Corinthianize' became a by-word for sexual immorality and corruption.

Paul arrived in Corinth on what we call his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 18:1-18). Such an important multi-cultural city was strategic for the spread of the gospel for from here the message could become widely spread. Yet it was not an easy place to proclaim the Christian message. At first Paul made his home with Priscilla and Aquila. He kept himself by making tents and on the Sabbath Days preached in the synagogue. Jewish opposition forced Paul to move to the house of Titus Justus. Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, was converted and when the proconsul, Gallio, refused to take action against Paul it enabled him to stay in Corinth for 18 months.

There is a problem over how many letters Paul actually wrote to the Corinthians. A reasonable explanation is that there were at least four letters. The first letter was misunderstood (1 Corinthians 5:9-11). The second letter we call 1 Corinthians. The third letter is sometimes called the 'sorrowful' letter. The fourth letter we call 2 Corinthians. (This is not the only interpretation but it is the easiest). Helped by evidence such as the dating for the proconsulship of Gallio, scholars generally accept a date for 1 Corinthians of A.D. 53-57.

It is difficult to reconstruct this part of Paul's life from the available information. It seems that the Corinthians responded positively to Paul's first letter (1 Corinthians), sorting out the problems of litigation among Christians and the abuse of the Lord's Supper. However, further problems arose, particularly the arrival of Judaizers (**11:4; 11:22**), who insisted that it was necessary to become a Jew (i.e. circumcised) to be saved. Paul, therefore, decided to visit the church – the 'painful visit'. When he did so a spokesman for an anti-Pauline clique directly opposed him (**2:5-10; 7:12**). After returning to Ephesus, Paul sent a further letter to the Corinthians (the 'sorrowful letter') calling for the wrongdoer to be punished and for the Corinthians to renew their support for the Christians in Jerusalem. Paul later left Ephesus (Acts 19:23-20:1) and after preaching in Troas and Asia went to Macedonia, where he heard that his 'sorrowful letter' had been well received (7:5-16). When Paul heard of further problems at Corinth he wrote another letter, 2 Corinthians. Paul expresses his joy in 2 Corinthians that the majority of the church had accepted his 'sorrowful letter'. He describes his ministry and reminds them of the collection for Christians at Jerusalem. He further defends his authority against the minority. It is possible to offer a tentative date for the writing of 2 Corinthians bearing in mind that 1 Corinthians was probably written between A.D. 53-57. It appears that the letters followed one another quite quickly. In 2 Corinthians (8:10; 9:2) Paul uses the phrase 'a year ago/last year' suggesting that the matters considered arose in a relatively short space of time.

2. Theme

There are two main reasons for the writing of 1 Corinthians. Paul had received reports about the church that had made him very uncomfortable, so there were issues that he felt he needed to address. The Corinthians had also sent to Paul asking his advice on certain questions, so there were issues to which he needed to respond. In the first part of the letter, Paul takes up the matters that have been reported to him. Power struggles and factions are causing divisions in the church, which have even resulted in some members taking other members to court.

There are also problems associated with the extremely pagan society. The church had a diverse membership of Greek, Roman (attested by Latin names such as Gaius, Fortunatus, Crispus and Justus), Jewish and Oriental people that reflected the culture in which it was set. Nevertheless, this brought its own problems, not only the cultural divisions, but also the background of many of the new Christians, which had not even been the morality of Judaism. There has been a case of incest and Paul speaks against it.

In the second part of the letter, Paul answers a variety of questions from the Corinthian church and gives some teaching on various matters, some of which seem more relevant to our present day context than others. Many of the Christians were immature, undisciplined extremists. The services were chaotic and in particular there were problems in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the right use of spiritual gifts, and over the dress and role of women in the church and its meetings. There is a long section on marriage and the single life. There is also a discussion about whether it is appropriate to eat meat that has been associated with the worship of idols and whether a Christian can in good conscience attend social functions in a pagan temple. Intellectually there may have been early Gnostic influences, such as the belief in the immortality of the soul rather than the resurrection of the body. Some of the members may have claimed some kind of superior knowledge. Possibly some did not understand the Christian teaching of the resurrection, which forms a large part of Paul's response.

Paul's first reason for writing what we call 2 Corinthians is his joy at the Corinthians' positive response to his letter (what is so-called the 'sorrowful letter'). The trouble at Corinth has caused Paul a great deal of heartache. He loves the Christian brothers and sisters deeply and is anxious that they make spiritual progress. It is for this reason alone that he felt compelled to write to them so strongly. As Paul writes again he is relieved to have had word back from Corinth through Titus that his 'sorrowful letter' has brought the Corinthians to their senses. His second reason for writing is his desire to get some things sorted out before his next visit. He exhorts them to complete their promised collection for the saints at Jerusalem before he arrives and urges them to be generous in their giving. He wants them to prepare for his visit with a time of self-examination and self-judgment. This will enable Paul to be spared the pain of having to exercise discipline within the church.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul often digresses from his main themes (2:14-7:4). In a short digression (6:11-7:1), Paul warns about the dangers of compromise with worldly standards. To counter the Judaizers, Paul describes how the gospel is superior to the Law of Moses for, whereas the glory of God on the face of Moses faded, the glory of the gospel of the New Covenant increases. The hope of resurrection spurs Paul on to the preaching of the gospel in whatever circumstances he may find himself. If Paul appears only to be bold for the gospel in a letter he reminds the Corinthians both of his Apostleship and weakness. He was not a man who would retreat before an enemy only to resort to a letter and the intervention of his delegate Titus to gain what he himself had failed to achieve. Paul visited Corinth again (Acts 20:2-3), completing his letter to the Romans there (Romans 15:26).

3. Issues

Groups of Christians can get too attached to a leader (e.g. Paul for the Gentiles, Apollos for those who liked eloquent preaching, Peter for the Jews, Christ for those who feel so superior as to think themselves the only real Christians) but their unity is in Christ. He also implores them to 'speak the same thing' (KJV) or 'agree with one another' (NIV). Paul's preaching is not clever, yet it is in its apparent foolishness that the cross has its power (1 Corinthians 1:10-17).

A case of sexual immorality, shocking even to the pagans, has occurred in Corinth (1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 6:12-20). It appears that a man has married his stepmother. Some, through an appeal to Christian liberty, justified this when, in fact, freedom in Christ is freedom to obey Christ rather than lawlessness. Short-term discipline is important for the long-term good of the individual and of the whole church. Christians have to live in the world but they are not 'in fellowship' with people who were once part of the church community but are now living in gross immorality (not only sexual sin but also to other sins – greed, idolatry, slander, drunkenness, swindling/extortion). In the common meal Christians show their unity, but not with this kind of person. Paul deals with the issue of abuses of the principle of Christian liberty. What we do with our bodies matters, for Christians not only believe in the immortality of the soul but also in the resurrection of the body.

Paul rules that women should pray with their heads covered (1 Corinthians 11:2-33). An unveiled woman could be mistaken for a prostitute. It was very important that Christian worship looked different from the worship of Aphrodite. The interpretation that the wearing of a veil is determined purely by the cultural context is largely though not universally accepted. The symbolic nature of the meal in our modern celebrations means that a lot of the issues do not apply but the principle of self-examination is still very important. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is handed down to us.

Christian love (1 Corinthians 13:1-13) is different both from that offered at the temple of Aphrodite and from spiritual pride. It is Christ-like love, in the spirit of Jesus. In what we call 1 Corinthians 15, Paul expounds the resurrection hope, the resurrection of Jesus Christ being an event on which the Christian faith either stands or falls. The historical validity of the resurrection is evidenced by eyewitnesses. Christ dying for our sins implies his sinlessness. If he did not rise there is no resurrection for anyone. Using the seed analogy, Paul shows that the body undergoes a transformation to be ready to live with God in eternity. Those who belong to Christ will ultimately be with him and like him.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul writes about one of the members who had caused him a great deal of pain (2 Corinthians 2:5-11). Such a member still has to be treated with compassion and love though this is different from mere toleration. Paul gives a timely reminder to those who are in danger of losing heart. The glorious ministry that is entrusted to us is valuable treasure (2 Corinthians 4:1-12). In persecution Paul remembers that a ministry that costs nothing accomplishes nothing.

The commission of Christ is to the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:16-21). The relationship between God and a lost world is thoroughly changed through all that Christ has accomplished on the cross. Treated as if he were a sinner, Christ became the object of God's wrath and bore the penalty and guilt of sin. So complete was the identification of the sinless Christ with the sin of the sinner, including its consequence of separation from God, Paul says, 'God made him ... to be sin for us.'

Giving is not something that is new in the Christian church (2 Corinthians 9:6-11). Paul sees giving not so much as sacrifice but as opening the door to great blessing. We reap in measure as we sow.

4. Application

For seven years I was minister in the South London suburb of Mitcham. What had once been a leafy, Surrey town, was in a period of rapid transition and in a relatively short period changed from a fairly monochrome residential area into a cosmopolitan and diverse community. In some senses the local church benefited from this as Christians from the world church joined what had formerly been a white, predominantly middle class congregation. The church changed to reflect the community in which it was set.

I remember a young woman, either a student or a young professional, greeting me at the door of the church after a Sunday morning service. She was confident and self-assured and asked me quite directly, 'why should I join your church?' I was pleased, however, that my response wrong-footed her. 'I am not sure that you should. What you need is a church which feeds you well enough so that you are not spiritually hungry and exercises you well enough so that you are not spiritually flabby but whether or not that is here I cannot say.'

There was an old adage often shared among peripatetic Christians who made it their business to flit from church to church in the vain hope of finding one that would be good enough for them, 'If ever you find a perfect church, don't join it, as you are sure to spoil it.' However, it's hard to know how anyone could not have reservations about the church at Corinth. The church was torn apart by divisions as powerful leaders and their followers vied with each other. One church member was having an affair with his stepmother but this was being justified in terms of freedom in Christ. Meanwhile, disputes between believers were being taken to the secular courts and while some members were visiting prostitutes other members were advocating celibacy. The challenge of breaking with a pagan past while living in a pagan society, disagreements about the role of men and women, order in worship where prophetic utterances and speaking in tongues were commonplace, the communion services being total chaos, and the fact that a number of members seemed not to believe in the resurrection were just some of the issues facing the church.

The church at Corinth was facing so many of the problems and underlying issues that we face in the twenty-first century. In our society, for the first time in hundreds of years a Christian perspective on many matters can no longer be assumed. The background of the society in which we live becomes more 'pagan' and 'secular' each year.

In the first letter, Paul responded to the Corinthians who were raising all kinds of problems, including the right understanding and practice of Christian marriage, whether or not it was right to eat meat that had been offered to idols, problems of disorder in worship, spiritual gifts and the right understanding of the Christian doctrine of resurrection. Christians in Britain are not normally called upon to decide whether to eat meat that has been involved in idolatrous worship. But there are parallel issues that demand our careful consideration. There are also issues to be faced as a whole church to do with mission, fellowship, divisions, responsible giving, spiritual gifts, and the right order of worship. Authority, discipline and patterns of leadership are also relevant to us. Issues such as suffering, death and the resurrection hope need to be addressed, all the more so when even regular church-goers seem to be confused about matters such as reincarnation.

In the second letter, Paul had to defend the very nature and character of his apostleship. Among the practical arrangements addressed was the issue of Christian giving. The church must be realistic about its problems and how it will deal with them. It needs to discipline the wayward in the hope of restoring them and preach reconciliation through the cross whatever the cost. It seems that spiritual strength and physical (human) weakness go side by side, in the Lord Jesus Christ and in his followers.