

"THE OCCASION OF 1 CORINTHIANS"

(David Garland)

Paul writes this letter from Ephesus before Pentecost (16:8), probably in the spring of 54 or 5 (Schrage 1991: 36; Thiselton 2000: 31-32). He is trying to keep up a long-distance relationship with this church without the benefit of the modern communication technology to which we are accustomed. The letter serves as his substitute presence. He has written a previous letter to the Corinthians that included the admonition not to associate with the sexually immoral (5:9). What precipitated that letter is unclear, and despite attempts of some scholars to find remnants of it embedded in the extant letters, it remains lost to us. The existence of this previous letter and Paul's comments about it in 5:9-11 reveal two things. First, it means that 1 Corinthians should not be read as if it were a series of essays on different themes. It is the continuation of an ongoing conversation between Paul and the church. Second, his comments reveal that he is acutely aware that he could be misunderstood. He is painfully conscious of this fact when he carefully qualifies what he says, for example, in 4:14; 9:15; and 10:19. The problem is that written correspondence is susceptible to misinterpretation even when the bearer of the letter is deputized to interpret what it means and particularly if a reader/auditor is ill-disposed to receive what is being said. Since Paul directly challenges the behavior of those who are likely to be powerful figures in the church, the potential is ever present for the targets of his ethical shafts to twist and distort his remarks. Not only must Paul persuade the culprits to change their behavior, but also he must garner the support of the entire community for them to exert moral suasion and authority over the miscreants.

This second letter to Corinth [our 1 Corinthians] has been prompted by oral reports from Chloe's people about the factional infighting in the church (1:11). Paul also has gotten wind of the case of incest (5:1), the factions at the Lord's Supper (11:18, "I hear there are factions among you"), and their confusion over the concept of the resurrection of the dead (15:12, "some among you are saying"). We cannot exclude the possibility that he also got an earful from Stephanas and his companions about the situation in Corinth and possibly also from Appolos, but he does not name them as sources. The Corinthians have also sent him a letter (7:1), probably carried by Stefanas, with various queries. In response, Paul alternates between reactions to the oral reports and answers to the Corinthian letter. (Terry 1995: 43):

- Oral reports (1:10-4:17 / 4:18-6:20)
 - Corinthian Letter (7:1-40 / 8:1-11:1)
- Oral reports (11:2-34)
 - Corinthian letter (12:1-14:40)
- Oral reports (15:1-58)
 - Corinthian letter (16:1-12)



The relationship between Paul and the church has not yet deteriorated to the stage it is when he writes 2 Corinthians, and the situation that this later letter depicts *should not* be read into the interpretation of one Corinthians. Paul is not on the defense in this letter as he is in 2 Corinthians.

Overall, the letter may be summed up as a warning against various perils, to which the Corinthians imagine themselves to be immune, or are simply oblivious. He warns against the perils of cliques and power factions that rip the fabric of the churches unity (1:10-4:21), of sexual immorality (5:1-7:40), idolatry (8:1-11:1), of cliques and power factions that sabotages the churches' worship (11:2-14:40), and of denying the resurrection of the dead (15:1-58). To prevent them from plummeting into an abyss, he brings them back to his first preaching of the cross, and his first preaching of the resurrection. Golder describes the letter as a "masterpiece, hard to fault: it is fair-minded, diplomatic, straightforward, dignified, principled, vigorous, fatherly, concealer." I find this description of the letter hard to fault.