

1 & 2 CORINTHIANS

A WINDOW INTO THE LIFE OF THE EARLY CHURCH.

In her commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians, Maria A. Pascuzzi captures the significance of these letters well when she writes:

“First and Second Corinthians are literary windows affording readers a “Paul’s eye” view into the life and development of one very dynamic Christian community. As we peer through them, what we see can quickly challenge idealized notions about the cohesiveness and harmony of the earliest communities of believers (cf. Acts 4:32). The way Paul tells it, the community at Corinth was characterised by rivalry (1Cor1:12); obsession with status and superior wisdom leading to arrogance (1Cor1-4); disregard for the less spiritually enlightened and gifted (1Cor 8:1-13; 12-14) as well as for the economic have-nots (1Cor11:17-22); sexual immorality (1Cor5:1-13; 6:12-20); assertiveness with respect to individual rights (1Cor6:12-13); and, as time went on, a suspicious and disdainful attitude towards Paul himself (2Cor1:12-2; 12:10-12).”

Maria A. Pascuzzi, *First and Second Corinthians*, New Collegeville Bible Commentary. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005.

In Paul’s letters to the Corinthians we meet real flesh and blood people struggling to work out the implications of their faith and to overcome very difficult and often divisive experiences within their own community. Paul’s letters represent his attempt to guide and correct them through these myriad problems that they have experienced in his absence.

1 Corinthians is also notable in that it deals with a greater number of distinct issues than any other of the Pauline correspondence. When we read this letter, we must always bear in mind that the issues Paul addresses were prompted by the particular circumstances, questions or behaviour arising in the daily life of the community that necessitated a response. They are not, nor were they meant to be, a systematic presentation of Paul’s theological insights or a presentation of what Paul regarded as the most important aspects of the Christian life. They were *ad hoc* responses to particular problems within a particular community. However, in and through his responses, Paul does develop and articulate his own understanding of faith, his own distinctive theology, that grounds and supports his pastoral advice to the community. In the process, Paul’s letters to the Corinthians offer important insights to how the first Christian communities understood their faith.

The significance of the letters to the Corinthians in Christian theology.

The Corinthian correspondence is significant in that it offers the oldest surviving written record of several key aspects of the Christian faith.

- The body as “a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19)
- The unity brought about by baptism: we “are all baptized into the one body” and “drink of the same spirit” (1 Cor 12:13).
- The idea of the Church as the ‘body of Christ’ wherein the gifts possessed by all Christians contribute to building up the entire body (1 Cor 12:1-31).
- The earliest Christian witness of the institution of the Eucharist (1 Cor 11:23-27). Indeed, Paul’s eucharistic theology appears only in 1 Corinthians, so we should

be grateful to the problems experienced by the community there that prompted his response and left us such an important early witness.

- The earliest written evidence attesting to the resurrection of Christ (1 Cor 5:4-8) and the first reference to the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body (1Cor15:15-26).
- 2 Corinthians offers a unique insight into Paul's self-understanding as an apostle.

Corinth in the time of Paul

Corinth, the capital city of the Roman province of Achaia was a bustling metropolis strategically located at the axis point of a narrow land mass (isthmus) that linked mainland Greece to the north with the Peloponnesian peninsula to the south as well as the axis point between harbours of Cenchrae and Lechaem which linked important shipping routes in the east and west Mediterranean. Treacherous seas made sailing around the Peloponnesian coast to the south dangerous and hence traders often opted to unload their cargo at these ports and transfer it via land to its sister port. Modern archaeology has confirmed Corinth's status as an important commercial, manufacturing and cultural centre.



Paul's relationship with the community at Corinth.

According to Acts 18:1-18 Paul founded the church in Corinth during an eighteen month stay there in 51-52 CE and this concurs with the apostle's own witness in 1Cor 3:6,10; 4:15. From the names mentioned in 1Cor16:15-18 and Rom16:21-23, scholars detect the presence of both Jewish and Gentile converts at Corinth with the latter somewhat in the majority. Scholars estimate that the community may have numbered anywhere from fifty to two hundred persons drawn from diverse social backgrounds. Paul's remarks about their insignificant status and origins in 1Cor1:26-21 suggest that much of the community was drawn from the city's lower classes but some of the names mentioned in the text (Crispus and Gaius in 1Cor1:14, Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus in 1Cor 6:17) suggest that it also included at least some individuals of means and social standing. This socioeconomic diversity accounts, at least in part, for some of the tensions that develop in the community.

After Paul left Corinth in 52 CE it appears that another missionary famed for his eloquence, by the name Apollos, preached at Corinth, undermining Paul's earlier mission

and dividing the community in terms of their loyalties. In 1Cor 5:9 Paul refers to a letter he had written to the Corinthians warning them not to have dealings with immoral persons but this letter has been lost (**Lost Letter A**). Around 56 CE Paul received a verbal report from “Chloe’s people” (1Cor1:11, 11:18) and later a letter sent from the community at Corinth (1Cor 7:1) [possibly in response to his earlier letter] setting out the situation in the community since his departure more than three years earlier. **1 Corinthians** represents Paul’s response, written from the city of Ephesus, to these twin reports and in it he seeks to correct nearly a dozen different areas of behaviour and belief.

After Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, several events took place that further strained his relationship with the community at Corinth. New opponents, whom Paul satirically refers to as “super-apostles” (2Cor11:5) rapidly gained positions of influence attracting the community to a style of faith that Paul regarded as a distortion of the true gospel. Informed of these events by Timothy, Paul made a brief, “painful” visit to Corinth (2Cor 2:1) only to suffer public humiliation (2Cor 2:1-5, 7:12). His visit a failure he returned to Ephesus, where he wrote the Corinthians what he himself calls “a tearful letter” (2 Cor 2:3-4; 7:8-9), severely reprimanding their behaviour (**Lost Letter B**).

Having carried this severe letter to Corinth, Titus rejoined Paul in Macedonia reporting the good news that the Corinthians had repented of their behaviour and now supported the apostle (2Cor 7:5-7). In response Paul wrote **2 Corinthians** sometime in late 57 CE. In the winter of that year Paul visited the community for the third time before personally delivering his collection to the church at Jerusalem. There is no evidence that Paul ever returned to Corinth.

It is against the background of this “roller-coaster” relationship between Paul and the community at Corinth that one must understand the apparently contradictory emotions of alienation, hostility, reconciliation and affection that we find in 1 & 2 Corinthians.

PAUL’S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CORINTHIANS

- Paul’s 1st visit to Corinth where he founds the church. 51/52 CE
- [Division in community caused by preaching of Apollos]
- Paul’s lost letter to community warning them against associating with immoral persons. [Letter A]
- Paul informed of deteriorating situation at Corinth.
- Paul writes 1 Corinthians.
- New opponents [the “super-apostles”] undermine Paul’s authority in Corinth.
- Paul’s second and “painful” visit to Corinth ends in failure.
- Paul’s ‘tearful letter severely reprimanding the Corinthians [Letter B].
- Corinthian community repents and accept Paul’s authority.
- Paul writes 2 Corinthians 9-11 [57 CE]
- Paul makes his third and final visit to Corinth on way to Jerusalem.

Fragments of a more extensive correspondence.

It is obvious from the outline above that what has been preserved in 1 & 2 Corinthians is only part of an ongoing and dynamic dialogue between Paul and this community, which included at least two more letters on the apostle’s part. We must also

remember that we have here only one half of a dialogue between two parties involved in an ongoing and evolving relationship. Many details and references that would have been immediately obvious to Paul and the Corinthians can only be guessed at today.

It is also probable that 2 Corinthians, as we now have it, may well be a composite of shorter letters (certainly two but some scholars suggest as many as five). The abrupt change of tone in chapter 10– from conciliation and appeal to protest and challenge – seems jarring and unnatural and most scholars concur that chapters 10-13 once formed or was part of a separate letter. Whatever their original form, 1 & 2 Corinthians, as they have been handed down to us, reflect the highs and lows of Paul’s often tumultuous relationship with this particular community and the very real growing pains experienced by both apostle and community within that relationship.

With the context outlined briefly above as background, carefully read Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians taking note of the different topics he addresses and the advice he offers to the community.

- *What strikes you most in this letter?*
- *Why does Paul urge the Corinthians to work towards unity?*
- *What essential beliefs does Paul reveal in the course of the letter?*

1 CORINTHIANS: THE TRUE NATURE OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY.

1 Corinthians is primarily a sustained call for unity in which Paul urges the community in Corinth to overcome serious divisions, abandon competitive behaviour and strive for unity of belief and purpose. Paul clearly sets forth his purpose for writing in the opening chapter: “*Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose*” (1Cor1:10). Much of the remainder of the letter is a sustained argument in support of this emphatic call to unity with Paul forcefully insisting on the communal and corporate nature of Christian identity throughout.

For Paul there is no such thing as “an individual Christian.” To be a Christian is to be a member of the body of Christ in which the members are to “have the same care for one another” (1Cor12:25) and in which the gifts given to each are “for the common good” (1Cor12:7). This principle of unity and fellowship deeply influences Paul’s response to the problems he encounters in the community. A clear example occurs in chapter 8 when some Corinthians (presumably the elite because they would have been the only ones able to afford meat) questioned Paul as to whether it was permissible to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols his answer underscores that the common good must be considered at all times (1Cor 8:4-13). The elite justified the practice on the basis that “an idol has no real existence.” While *theologically* Paul agrees that idols are nothing and therefore believers are technically free to act as they think best, his *pastoral* sense leads him to urge them to refrain from doing so lest they offend another’s believer’s conscience.

The structure of 1 Corinthians may be represented as follows:

GREETING AND THANKSGIVING 1:1-9

BODY OF THE LETTER

- Response to Divisions 1:10-4:21
- Answers to problems within community 5:1-10:33
- Instructions on worship and doctrine, public prayer and charisms 11:1-14:40
- The Resurrection of the Body 15:1-58

CLOSING REMARKS 16:1-24

Response to divisions.

Paul's immediate task is to halt the rivalries that divide the community. One source of division was conflicting loyalties between members of the community who had declared preferences; some for Paul, others for Apollos or Cephas (1 Cor 1:12). Paul, to his credit, does not simply seek to defend the faction that "belongs" to him but rather insists that it is in the name of Christ alone that they have been baptized and that there can be no division in Christ.

Another source of division flowed from the claim by some of the wealthier and better educated members of the community that they possessed superior wisdom and spiritual insight. Paul responds by insisting that for Christians, true wisdom and divine power are to be found not in the arrogance of human wisdom and knowledge but in the apparently weak and foolish message of a despised and crucified Saviour. True wisdom and spiritual insight consists in knowing the crucified Christ and following his example of love. Care must be taken not to see Paul's argument here as somehow devaluing human reason and wisdom *per se*. Rather its purpose is to make clear that Christianity is incompatible with any form of elitism and individual pride.

Problems concerning behaviour in the community.

Having dealt with the problem of factions in the community Paul turns to various problems affecting the community such as a member who is causing scandal by living with his father's wife, the question of how to resolve disputes between members of the Church and the question of whether it is permissible to eat meat that had previously being sacrificed in idol worship. Paul's preference for the single life over marriage might strike us as strange but can be accounted for in large part by his conviction that Christ would return quickly. Accordingly he believed that the single life offered believers the greatest freedom to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the Lord's work. However he realizes that this is not a practical option for many and argues against the separation of Christian partners and views sexual relations as essential to marriage.

Instructions on worship, doctrine and spiritual gifts.

Chapters 11-14 contain Paul's advice about the orderly conduct of Christian worship. He instructs both men and women on appropriate demeanour in worship (1Cor11:1-6). He recounts Christ's institution of the Eucharist, the earliest such written record. In Paul's day, eucharist involved Christians gathering together in the private homes of some of the wealthier members in order to share fellowship and prayer at a normal evening meal during which they would commemorate the Lord's Supper. Apparently Paul had heard that the wealthy elite were arriving earlier than the others and feasting on the finest foods, leaving those from the lower classes hungry and humiliated

when they arrived (1Cor 11:17-22). Paul condemns their actions as having disfigured what was meant to be a celebration of unity into a source of division and inequality.

In chapter 12 Paul responds to rivalries between those who possessed different spiritual gifts in the community by developing the image of the church as the ‘body of Christ’ – a mutually interdependent community of believers. Each gift or charism must be used for the benefit of the entire body – the church. In his inspirational hymn to love in chapter 13 Paul insists that even the most honoured spiritual gifts – prophesy, knowledge, power and self-sacrifice – are worthless without love. Love must always stand at the heart of the Christian life. Love is to be its guiding principle.

The Resurrection of the Dead

In chapter 15 Paul confronts those who have questioned the hope of bodily resurrection by providing a list of those who had been eyewitnesses to the risen Christ [the earliest written evidence of the resurrection of Christ] and arguing that the resurrection of Christ is both the guarantee and model of the resurrection of the body that believers will enjoy at Christ’s coming. His understanding of the resurrection maps a careful path between two extremes – understanding resurrection as the mere resuscitation of the corpse on the one hand and interpreting it simply as a “spiritual” resurrection on the other. Paul insists that the resurrection will not involve the mere restoration of the physical body but rather its transformation into a glorious and immortal body.

Closing Remarks

Paul closing remarks are notable for his reminding the Corinthians of their previous agreement to help the church at Jerusalem. Paul’s commitment to helping the church in Jerusalem is a concrete example of the living out of the call to charity and fellowship that lies at the heart of this letter. Moreover it shows that Paul understood this call to fellowship as pertaining now simply to life within a given Christian community but also as regulating the relationship between the different communities. The letter ends with a prayer for Jesus’ speedy return – “Marana tha” – Come, O Lord.

Read 2 Corinthians taking note of its changes of tone and emphasis.

- *What emotions do you sense are driving Paul as he writes the different sections of this letter?*
- *What arguments does Paul present to defend his authority as a true apostle?*

2 CORINTHIANS A WINDOW INTO PAUL’S SELF-UNDERSTANDING.

George Herbert, the great English poet and pastor once wrote: “*What an admirable letter is Second Corinthians. How full of passion! Paul rejoices and is sorrowful, he grieves and he glories. Never was there such care of a flock expressed, save in the great Shepherd of the fold who first shed tears over Jerusalem and afterwards blood.*” Nowhere else is the passionate human character of St Paul more evident than in Second Corinthians. Here we have the personal testimony of the apostle himself regarding his

own apostolic ministry and his ardent reaction when distrusted and accused by a community that he cared deeply for.

Even casual readers will readily detect a sharp change of tone in the letter from the more conciliatory tone of chapters 1-9 to one of sarcasm and condemnation in chapters 10-13 and, most scholars suggest that these sections were most likely originally two separate letters reflecting very different moments in Paul's relationship with the community.

2 Corinthians 1-9 Paul's relationship with the community at Corinth.

As we have seen above, after his failed "painful visit" to Corinth, in which he had been publicly humiliated, Paul wrote what he terms a "tearful letter" [Lost Letter B] to the community severely reprimanding them for their behaviour. This letter apparently had the desired effect and Titus returned with the news that the community once more accepted Paul's authority as an apostle (2Cor7:5-7).

In response Paul wrote a joyful letter of reconciliation to the Corinthians (preserved in chapters 1-9 of 2 Corinthians) in which he narrates his dealings with the community from the beginning and explores the meaning of same. As such it offers us a unique insight into Paul's own mind concerning the nature of his apostolic ministry to which the love of God "compelled him" (2Cor5:14). Paul insists on the sincerity and constancy of his care for the community at Corinth. Stressing that he is no "peddler of God's word" (2Cor2:17) [an indirect accusation against his opponents of benefiting personally from their preaching] he insists that he should need no letter of recommendation to the Corinthians for they themselves are his living letters of recommendation.

Paul acknowledges God as the sole source of power of his ministry (2Cor4:7) and argues powerfully that his own personal weakness and sufferings paradoxically authenticate his ministry. His physical weakness and the sufferings and hardships he has endured as an apostle (2Cor4:8-10, 6:5) are not signs of failure but paradoxically authenticate his ministry. "*For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh (2Cor4:11).*"

Having established his apostolic credentials Paul reiterates his fervent and heartfelt desire in chapter 7 to be reconciled with the community at Corinth and expresses confidence of working in full partnership in the gospel with them. In chapters 8 and 9 he returns to the theme of the collection for the church in Jerusalem that he had previously spoken of, both in Galatians and 1 Corinthians, offering therein the most sustained argument in any of his writings for the many motives for Christian charitable giving.

Paul's severe counter attack against his opponents 2Cor 10-13

The final chapters of 2 Corinthians could hardly be more different in tone and emphasis. Gone is the conciliatory tone that urged forgiveness and mercy for the one who had caused him pain on his "painful visit" (2Cor2:5-8) and it is replaced here by a stinging counter-attack against other preachers whom Paul sarcastically refers to as 'super-apostles' (2Cor11:5, 12:11) who have undermined Paul's authority at Corinth. These newcomers boast of their power but Paul dismisses them out of hand as false prophets and deceitful workers (2Cor11:13). Paul's opponents have apparently ridiculed his physical weakness and shortcomings as a preacher and boasted of their own spiritual gifts., Paul responds by asserting that he could equally well boast of his pedigree

(2Cor11:22-23) and the abundance of his own mystical visions (2Cor12:1-7) but he refuses to do so, instead choosing to boast only of his weakness and his reliance on Christ. He lists the weaknesses and woes of his ministry (2Cor11:23-29) as signs that he is in fact an authentic servant of God. He willingly endures weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ in the unwavering belief that “*when I am weak, then I am strong.*” Scholars continue to puzzle over what the “thorn in his flesh” Paul refers to (2Cor12:17) might be, with suggestions ranging from physical illness or impediment to persecution and opposition. Whatever it was, this and other forms of suffering were important to Paul because he was convinced that it is in weakness that God’s power is brought to perfection. Paul insists that his sufferings and weakness, derided and mocked by his opponents, in no way call his status as an apostle of Christ into question. On the contrary they confirm it for it is precisely in human weakness that the power of the crucified and risen Christ lies.

Whilst Paul’s stinging sarcasm in defending himself against accusation may offend modern Christian sensibilities it should be understood in terms of his intense emotional commitment to the Corinthians welfare and his understandable sense of hurt and anger at being wronged by his opponents. He insists more than once that despite the severity of its message his purpose in writing is not to “tear down” but rather to build up the community (2Cor10:8, 12:19) and the letter ends with his fervent hope that this severe correction will have the desired effect in restoring the community to the right path.

Fr Sean O’ Sullivan
Cork & Ross Office of Adult Religious Education