

1 and 2 Corinthians

Getting Started

While 1 and 2 Corinthians are presented as two separate letters in the New Testament it is convenient to deal with them together in an overview of this nature; the two letters were written to the same local church within a fairly short period of time, and in addition to this it is possible that they are both compilations of several letters.

Almost all scholars agree that Paul is the author of these letters. Both the external and internal evidence is overwhelmingly strong (Morris, 2000). There is, however, some debate concerning when they were written, with estimations as early as AD 53 and as late as AD 57. The general opinion is that 1 Corinthians was written from Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8) in AD 54, and 2 Corinthians a year later, probably from Philippi (Belleville, 1996). Paul therefore appears to have pastored the Corinthian church for between 18 months and three and a half years.

Some commentators argue for a unifying theme holding 1 Corinthians together which several suggest is an extended appeal for unity. Others believe the theme to be the idea that Paul is countering the infiltration of secular values (Johnson, 2004). However, Thiselton contends that there is a lot more to these letters than correction of problems arising from factions, discord and worldliness (Thiselton, 2000).

These letters open a window into the life of a first century local church. The Corinthian church had its problems and challenges, as do churches in our day, but it was full of spiritual vitality. Paul had to counsel moderation in the application of spiritual manifestations whereas if he had been writing to many of today's churches he might have had to admonish them for quenching the Spirit.

The letters also provide fascinating insights into Paul's temperament and personal challenges. In some places his own feelings of hurt, anger and frustration come through so clearly (2 Cor 10-11) that they beg a productive debate on just how God chose to inspire the writing of the scriptures. More than this though, the letters speak right to the heart of current church life. The problems and possibilities are cloaked in the culture of that time, yet the underlying issues and principles remain pressingly important today.

The Community of Believers

Corinth was an important city from a military perspective because of its position high up on a rocky ridge on an isthmus connecting the Greek Peloponnesus (peninsula) with the continent. It was also commercially significant because its port, accessing two seas, made it a centre of trade between Europe and Asia. It was, therefore, a wealthy city and also a centre for art and education. The temple of Venus was located there, together with temples or sanctuaries devoted to no less than 20 other pagan deities, and this enhanced its notoriety of being the most licentious of all the cities of the ancient world (Hodge, 1995). Its population was heterogeneous, consisting mainly of Romans, Greeks, and Jews, with Greeks in the majority. The composition of the church in Corinth probably reflected this demographic.

Ancient Greek culture and religious licence provided a bias towards both sectarianism and immorality (Hodge, 1995) and both of these shortfalls were unfortunately on display in the local church. In many ways the people of Corinth were similar to 1st world communities of the 21st century, valuing performance over character, and pragmatism over truth (Johnson, 2004). These similarities make 1 and 2 Corinthians fruitful sources of determining Godly responses to the prevailing conditions of our day.

What we know of ancient Corinth comes mainly from historical and archaeological studies but the letters themselves present considerable insight into the prevailing conditions. There appear to be several distinct reasons why Paul wrote the letters. He mentions some people from Chloe's household reporting to him that there were serious quarrels and divisions among members (1 Cor 1:11). Further on in the first letter to the Corinthians Paul also starts to address matters that the congregants had raised in a letter or verbal report to him (1 Cor 7:1). This may have been delivered to Paul by Stephanas and friends (1 Cor 16:17). These matters included the suitability of marriage within the prevailing societal immorality, but also in the light of the belief that Jesus would return at any time in the near future and that a single status might therefore aid dedicated ministry and evangelism. Another matter raised was a proper response to those who felt free to eat food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8:10). Paul also addressed matters of impropriety in worship services, the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11) and the acceptable responses to the manifestations of the Spirit (Gifts of the Spirit).

Just how many letters Paul wrote, and when, is a matter long debated among biblical scholars. Some are confident that we can deduce from Acts and comments in 1 and 2 Corinthians that Paul actually wrote four letters (Datiri, 2006). Some, such as Weiss, Jewett, Sellin, and others, opt for anything between 3 and 5 separate letters making up 1 Corinthians alone (Thiselton, 2000, p. 36). Thiselton argues for the integrity of the letters as we have them and comments favourably on de Boer's suggestion that that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians in two parts but dispatched them as

one unified letter; one part being a response to Chloe's people and the second part a response written after he received a second report (p. 38).

What is clear is that Paul refers in 1 Cor 5:9 to what appears to be an earlier letter and also to what has been called a 'severe' letter written sometime after his initial visit to the church (2 Cor 2:3). There are three tenable theories concerning this later reference: (1) that it is 1 Corinthians itself, (2) that it is a no longer extant letter positioned between 1 and 2 Corinthians, or (3) that it is preserved in 2 Corinthians chapters 10 to 13 which constitutes a separate letter written before 2 Corinthians chapters 1 to 9 were penned.

All this adds to the interest and depth of complexity of these letters and provides a possible basis for understanding divine inspiration of scripture as extending to the editing, compilation and preservation of the original documents. The composition and timing of the letters also serves to enhance our appreciation of both Paul as a person and the church conditions he addresses.

So what's it all about?

It is easy to label these letters as 'problem' epistles (Richards, 1994) but there is another aspect to them that we must not fail to appreciate; they are windows into the life of a lively, albeit rambunctious church. In our times we often see similar cameos of church life presented in charismatic and Pentecostal circles. On the other hand the post-modern church is blighted by dead religiosity presenting as orthodoxy or liberal accommodation to the spirit of the age. The church in Corinth certainly did not fall into the later categories and presents an instructive insight into how a church should and should not function in community. By 'should function' we can take instruction from the interaction and yieldedness to the Holy Spirit in the worship services; and by 'should not function' we can learn from the pride, divisiveness, worldly moral compromise and disorderly communal behaviour of the Corinthian believers.

Right at the outset Paul deals with sectarianism and division within the church – surely still a major concern in our day. He brings his argument and admonishments to a head when he writes; 'Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple'. (1 Co 3:16-17 NIV).

Immorality is a recurring concern that Paul addresses in his letters. In Chapters 5 and 6 of 1 Corinthians he deals with the matter of a church member who is sleeping with his father's wife (stepmother presumably) and he berates the church for taking pride in their liberal attitude towards this. Later in chapter six he returns to the matter

of sexual immorality. Sandwiched between these two issues Paul deals with the matter of lawsuits among believers and points out how shameful it is when believers cannot settle their differences within the structures and processes of the church.

In Chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians Paul addresses the matter of marriage, yet it is reasonably clear from what he writes that he is considering marriage primarily within the context of the difficult times and the imminent return of Christ. This can be deduced from the question of whether unmarried daughters should be allowed to marry, where he responds; 'because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are' (1 Cor 7:26). He then continues with; 'what I mean, brothers, is that the time is short.' (7:29). On the other hand the early churchman commonly called Ambrosiaster was of the opinion that Paul was countering the teaching of false apostles who were advocating celibacy as a mark of holiness (Bray, 1999).

Paul deals with the matter of female participation in worship services (chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians) from the perspective of 'headship'. The issue was not so much the participation of woman as it was the evidence of proper familial relationship which allowed for their participation without violating the headship structure of the Christian home (1 Cor 11:5). Head covering was the cultural expression of this principle and although mantillas and hats in church may no longer be appropriate, the principle still remains.

Another matter relating to the gathered church was the way the Corinthians were celebrating the Lords Supper. Instead of a sacred remembrance of Jesus' death they were using it as an opportunity for discrimination and drunken excess. In the early days of the church the Lord's Supper was placed within the context of a church family meal and it is highly unlikely that Paul had in mind the sacredness of the elements of bread and wine when he warned them that 'anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself (1 Cor 11:29). Rather, he was more likely reaffirming that the church is the Body of Christ and that we violate this truth when we discriminate and act inappropriately when we come together in Jesus' name.

The sections of 1 Corinthians that have attracted the most attention, particularly during the charismatic renewal of the early 1960s, are the 'gifts' chapters 12 and 14. These chapters have provided for much debate, and often confusion, yet they stand as wonderful insights into vibrant, if sometimes disorderly, church life. Much of the confusion surrounding spiritual 'gifts' arises from a failure to distinguish between human ministries and the manifestations of the Spirit both through these ministries and indeed believer present in a worship meeting (1 Cor 12:4-7). In the final analysis, Paul's instructions are clear – all believers are part of the one body of the church and all have a role to play – all should be available to the Holy Spirit as and when He chooses to manifest His gifts to the body – everything within the context of a church meeting is for the common good and the building up of the church. He

sums up with the words; 'Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way' (1 Cor 14:39-40 NIV).

The last chapters of 1 Corinthians are devoted to teaching concerning the resurrection of Christ and the resulting resurrection of believers. In these chapters Paul gives some insight into the nature of the resurrected human body. He then concludes the letter with an appeal for financial assistance for God's people in need.

In 2nd Corinthians, after opening salutations and a frank disclosure of his personal feelings, Paul proceeds to set out the principles of ministry under the New Covenant as opposed to the old Mosaic Law. 2 Corinthians 2:14 to 7:4 is sometimes called 'the great digression' because 7:4 resumes the narrative of 2:13. Some conclude from this that this 'digression' constitutes a separate letter that was later included in what we now know as 2nd Corinthians (Harris, 2005).

Chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians provide a comprehensive teaching on financial giving and act as a strong counter to ubiquitous claims, especially within many Pentecostal and Faith churches, that Christians are still under the 'law of tithing.'

There are foretastes of Paul's defence of his apostolic ministry in 1 Corinthians chapter 4 but in chapters 10 to 13 of second Corinthians Paul sets out his case with great passion and persuasive force. The change in both tone and style is so sudden and stark that several scholars have concluded that this section is in fact the 'severe letter' written after the balance of 2 Corinthians and later combined into the one epistle. Several commentators deal very comprehensively with the arguments both in favour and against this contention and a good treatment is on pages 29 to 51 of Harris' commentary on the Greek text (Harris, 2005).

Whatever ones views concerning the integrity of 1 and 2 Corinthians, they provide important insights into a church community strikingly similar to much of today's church life. They also contain profound doctrinal teachings concerning both theological and practical issues. Moreover, these two epistles reveal much concerning Paul's emotional state and even his character traits. This is helpful when it comes to better understanding some of his statements and teachings, but it also raises the important question of just how God chose to communicate through the inspired written Word. Paul's frank and transparent 'defence' reveals a decidedly human partnership in the inspired production of scripture.

Meeting Jesus again

Paul starts his first letter to the Corinthian church by introducing himself as 'Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus'. His authority to instruct the believers is that

he is Jesus' sent one. Later, in chapter 9 he bases his apostolic integrity on the fact that he has personally seen Jesus. His subsequent defence of his ministry as an apostle starts with the words; 'By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you.' (2 Cor 10:1), and he clinches his claim by stating that Jesus took him up into heaven and personally instructed him (2 Cor 12:2-6).

In the remainder of his first salutation to the Corinthian church Paul identifies his readers as the church in Corinth 'sanctified in Christ Jesus' and all others who 'call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ — their Lord and ours'. He blesses his readers with grace and peace from God and the Lord Jesus Christ, acknowledges that Christ's grace has been given them and enriches them, and that He will keep them strong and blameless until 'the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The letters start this way because, although they deal with many issues, they are all about Jesus and centred on Him. When Paul writes concerning factions within the church he asks, 'is Christ divided?' When he admonishes them because of sexual immorality he writes, 'do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself?' Even when he refers to his own anguish he acknowledges that Jesus is the source of the comfort that overflows from him to his readers (2 Cor 1:5).

Throughout his letters Paul uses the analogy of the church as the body of Christ. In his strong corrections concerning the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion) he warns them that they will suffer if they fail to recognise the body of the lord represented by all of the church members (1 Cor 11:29). In his discourse on the 'gifts of the Spirit' Paul identified each member of the gathered church as a functional part of the body of Christ that can and should be ministering gifts to the congregation.

When dealing with the matter of leadership within the church Paul switches from the analogy of a body to that of a building and categorically states that 'no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:11). He explains that other leaders merely build on the foundation that he, Paul, has already established, and that foundation is Jesus – His person and His divine lordship.

When he establishes doctrine and practice Paul roots it in Christ Jesus. His argument for only allowing public participation of woman who are in submission to appropriate headship is based on the fact that every husband or father is under Christ's headship (1 Cor 11:3) and that, therefore, they act in that capacity for the women in their families. When he starts his extended teaching on spiritual 'gifts' Paul gives the acid test of spiritual authenticity as the declaration that Jesus is lord (1 Cor 12:3). When calling for generosity in financial giving he again cites Jesus as the prime example (2 Cor 8:9).

In presenting the Gospel that he preaches he takes pains to explain that it is all about Jesus, who He is, and what He has done. He refers to Jesus as the one who has become our righteousness, holiness and redemption (1 Cor 1:30). He sets out

the essence of the Gospel as the fact that Christ Jesus died, was buried, and rose from the dead in accordance with scripture (1 Cor 15:3-4) and that the resurrection is the ultimate proof of the Gospel (1 Cor 15:14-19). He claims that Satan has blinded the eyes of unbelievers 'so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God' (2 Cor 4:4-5 NIV).

Although the majority of the believers in Corinth were probably Romans and Greeks, Paul appeals to his Jewish readers in a number of Christ-centred ways. He connects Christian baptism with the ancient Red Sea experience of the Jewish ancestors and even points out that the rock that poured forth water during the wilderness sojourn represented Christ Jesus (1 Cor 10:4). He links new birth in Christ to the original creation with the words; 'for as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive' (1 Cor 15:22 NIV). Later, in 2 Cor 5:17 he picks up on this again with, 'therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.' In yet another appeal to the Old Testament he states that 'for no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.' (2 Cor 1:20 NIV).

So, for both converted Jew and for the Gentile Paul makes it abundantly clear that Jesus is central in all he is and all that he writes.

Digging Deeper

One of the advantages of consulting recent commentaries is that the authors of the more comprehensive works usually interact with other major scholars, both past and present. Here is a brief presentation of six fairly recent works that have been rated as the top evangelical commentaries¹ on 1 and 2 Corinthians. However one work consisting of the applicable commentaries of ancient scholars is also worthy of mention.

[Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament VII 1-2 Corinthians](#)
Edited by Gerald Bray and published in 1999 by Inter Varsity Press.

The book covers both epistles section by section with each section broken down into its key components and explained with brief commentaries or notes by many of the ancient scholars. For instance the first three verses of 1 Corinthians are commented on by Ambrosiaster, Chrysostom, Pelagius, Origen, and Theodoret of Cyr.

¹ <http://www.bestcommentaries.com/1-corinthians/> <http://www.bestcommentaries.com/2-corinthians/>
<http://www.challies.com/resources/best-commentaries-on-1-corinthians>
<http://www.challies.com/resources/best-commentaries-on-2-corinthians>

The comments most quoted in this work are by the anonymous fourth-century scholar previously mistaken for Ambrose but now given the pseudonym "Ambrosiaster." His commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians has previously been unavailable in English translation, but has been used extensively throughout this volume.

Chrysostom is one of the best known of the patristic commentators whose contributions are used in this work. His seventy-seven discourses on the two Corinthian epistles are generally appreciated for their expository and practical content. This commentary also makes use of the fragmentary works of Didymus the Blind and Severian of Gabala which provide samples of Greek exegesis from the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools. The partial work of Theodore of Mopsuestia, a commentator of deep insight, has been valued by the church over the centuries and he too contributes where appropriate. The comments of Theodoret of Cyrus display an understanding of the intertextuality of Scripture. Origen and Pelagius, also feature in this work. Both have been criticised for fringe and sometimes aberrant theology yet they were brilliant scholars with deep insight into the scriptures.

While modern and postmodern scholars make use of both the latest available manuscripts and technology it is often very helpful to get as far back in time to source as one can – this commentary helps to do just that.

The First Epistle to the Corinthians by Anthony C. Thiselton is part of the New International Greek Testament Commentary series and published by Eerdmans in 2000.

This, like his commentary on 2 Corinthians is very detailed and thorough. It is 1424 pages long and provides in-depth discussion of the language of 1 Corinthians, often making use of the author's own translation of the Greek. He traces major issues of interpretation from the early church fathers to current scholars. He also develops theological, ethical, and socio-historical topics that are of particular interest today.

In this excellent commentary Thiselton interacts with almost all major scholarly research on 1 Corinthians and his bibliography is extensive. He addresses practically every question that any thoughtful pastor, teacher, or student would ask concerning the text. The only qualifier is that the reader should have some knowledge of biblical Greek in order to get the most benefit from this commentary.

The First Epistle to the Corinthians by Gordon Fee was published in 1987 by Eerdmans as part of the New International Commentary on the New Testament series.

This commentary has been acclaimed as possibly the best study available of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. It is written primarily for pastors, teachers, and students, but offers a very readable exposition that sets out Paul's ideas within their larger theological context.

Significantly Anthony Thiselton endorsed this work as; 'an impressively thorough commentary, which offers both judicious comment and useful documentation. . . . It deserves to rank as one of the leading commentaries on 1 Corinthians.'

One of the many reviews reads; 'this book represents mature scholarship, thought, and an awareness of the kinds of questions people want answers to'². The same reviewer comments; 'Fee's logic is impressive. He takes 30-35 pages to untangle 1 Cor. 11:2-16, which represents one of the most difficult passages in the Greek NT. His evidence and reasoning are strong, and I've concluded the NIV (and most translations) botch this difficult passage. In trying to smooth out the difficulties in the Greek, our translations create meanings that are not well supported by the Greek nor the culture. Fee offers a sane exposition of this section'.

One of the main strengths of this work is that the author is orientated towards charismatic understanding and practice yet interacts extensively with non-charismatics in his treatment of passages such as chapters 12 and 14 of 1 Corinthians.

A revised edition of this work was published in December 2014 based on the 2011 edition of the NIV and taking into account the best scholarship over the past twenty-five years.

1 Corinthians by David Garland and published by Baker Academic in 2003 as part of their Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series.

and

2 Corinthians published in 1999 by Broadman & Holman as part of their New American Commentary series.

As with the works of Thiselton and Fee, these works interact extensively with contemporary research and also reference patristic commentaries for background, translation and interpretation. Garland also provides his own Greek translation for 1 Corinthians but relies mainly on the NIV translation in his earlier work on 2 Corinthians. He provides extensive notes to aid the reader in further research.

² David Kilpatrick's review of the book as presented on amazon.com

The second epistle to the Corinthians by Paul Barnett and published in 1997 by Eerdmans as part of their New International Commentary on the New Testament series.

This is a very readable commentary and one of its strengths is that the author discusses Paul's theology and not just the exegetical issues that arise from the letter. This work is based on a comprehensive study of the Greek text yet contains a minimum of Greek references in the body of the writing; Barnett deals with grammatical, textual, and historical problems mainly in footnotes, additional notes, and appendixes.

The Second Epistle to the Corinthians by Murray Harris published in 2005 by Eerdmans as part of their New International Greek Testament Commentary.

A special feature of this work is the extent to which the author interacts with older English translations of the biblical text. This is evidence of his close attention to matters of grammar and textual criticism. Harris also provides an expanded paraphrase that succinctly demonstrates his choices on exegetical alternatives.

These seven works would form a comprehensive core library for anyone wanting to study 1 or 2 Corinthians.

Just a Taste

There are so many fascinating and rich passages in these two letters that it is hard to single any one of them out for more detailed evaluation. However, one small portion of 1 Corinthians seems to have been largely overlooked, or circumnavigated, by most Pentecostals and Charismatics and so provides fruitful ground for study.

The NIV translates 1 Co 14:2-3 as; 'For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort'. Surprisingly, the common practice among charismatically orientated churches is to present interpreted tongues as an alternative form of prophecy. Yet, the text declares that tongues are not to men but to God. In other words, tongues issue from us to God and thus constitute an act of

prayer rather than prophecy. Prophecy, on the other hand, is universally recognised as communication from God to us.

The Holman's translation (HCSB) has 'in another language' rather than 'a tongue' but this points to the nature of tongues rather than their purpose. The other modern translations do not add anything to the NIV concerning the 'direction' of tongues – to God rather than from God.

Exegeting the Greek text does not help much here either because the meaning of the phrase is relatively clear.

ὁ γὰρ λαλῶν γλώσση οὐκ ἄνθρωποις λαλεῖ ἀλλὰ Θεῷ.

This translates literally as 'for he that speaks in an unknown tongue not to men but to God'. The key issue here is 'not to men but to God'. Thiselton notes that 'to speak in a tongue in this chapter almost always denotes an up welling of praise or prayer or praising (Thiselton, 2000, p. 1085). For instance in 1 Cor 14:16 Paul, in the context of speaking in tongues, writes; 'if you are praising God' (NIV), and later in verse 17, 'your prayer of thanks to God'³ (GNT). So then, Paul indicates that tongues are expressions of praise and thanks to God.

Some attempts have been made to accommodate Paul's understanding of tongues to include a form of prophecy, but it is worth noting what Thiselton writes concerning this. He criticises Dautzenberg's claim that utterances to God in the Spirit hardly differ from prophecy. He also states that it is his opinion that declaration of the deeds of God 'spoken back to God' is an inappropriate understanding within the context of the passage. He then cites Gordon Fee's view that tongues is a form of communing with God as opposed to 'a message in tongues' (Thiselton, 2000, p. 1085).

Paul instructs that tongues spoken out in a church gathering are to be interpreted by someone else or, failing that, by the one who has spoken in tongues (1 Cor 14:5, 13, 27). He makes the reason for this clear – that all may be edified, for what use to others is an uninterpreted tongue of praise to God; how can they say "amen" to that? This of course makes common sense. Prophecies are communications from God to the congregants, spoken out in the vernacular, and thus needing no interpretation. It makes no sense, let alone responsible biblical understanding, to conceive of interpreted tongues as a form of prophecy.

If we understand tongues as both a private and corporate way of expressing deep praise and thankfulness to God, then it is entirely inappropriate to quibble over it, argue against its current validity, and otherwise make points of sectarian distinction around it. Tongues are surely a gift of the Holy Spirit given to us so that we can

³ This translation of 1 Cor 14:17 is followed by several other bible translations including the New English Bible and God's Word translation.

express, beyond the limitations of our known languages, the depth and fervour of our love for God.

The Challenge

These two wonderful epistles challenge us at so many levels. The importance of unity within the local church confronts us over and over again. We have to stop to soberly consider just how church splits and factions destroy the church and dishonour the head of the church, the Lord Jesus.

The licentiousness of the Corinthians must surely resonate with our current conditions and experiences in the world around us, and so Paul's admonitions in this regard are both pertinent and valuable.

His instructions concerning freedom in the Spirit within a framework of order are invaluable; they leave us room neither for cynical sessionism nor charismania.

The sections on the resurrection are the basis for great thanksgiving and hope and the instructions concerning financial giving are a wonderful counter and alternative to the concept of legalistic tithing in the church of our day.

Even Paul's transparent disclosure of his emotional state and character disposition can serve to edify and encourage us at a number of levels. They show Paul as a person of normal human frailty and that surely gives us all encouragement.

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