

Historical Background & Pretext (Lesson 1)

Understanding why Paul wrote this letter and what was happening in Corinth is essential for accurate interpretation. The following pretext questions establish the historical and literary context.

AUTHOR, RECIPIENTS, AND SETTING

1. Who wrote this book? The Apostle Paul (with Sosthenes mentioned in the greeting, 1:1). Paul identifies himself as “called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.”

2. To whom is the book addressed? To the church of God that is in Corinth — those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints, together with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

3. Where was it written? Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:8 “I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost” and 1 Corinthians 16:19, where Aquila and Priscilla send greetings from there).

4. When was it written? During Paul’s third missionary journey, in the spring of approximately AD 54-55. This was during the third year of Paul’s extended stay in Ephesus (Acts 20:31). Paul indicates he plans to stay until Pentecost and then winter with the Corinthians (though his actual travel plans later changed, as seen in 2 Corinthians).

OCCASION AND PURPOSE

5. What was the occasion of the writing? Paul had received disturbing reports about the doctrinal and moral condition of the church. Specifically, members of Chloe’s household had informed him of divisions and other problems (1:11). The church had also written Paul a letter with specific questions about marriage, food sacrificed to idols, spiritual gifts, and the collection for the saints (see the repeated phrase “now concerning...” in 7:1, 8:1, 12:1, 16:1).

6. What was the purpose for the writing? Correction and restoration. Paul addresses every major challenge facing the Corinthian church (divisions, immorality, lawsuits, confusion over marriage and liberty, disorder in worship, abuse of spiritual gifts, and denial or misunderstanding of the resurrection) with clear doctrine, apostolic authority, pastoral admonition, and a “fatherly” plea. His goal is to call them back to living worthy of the gospel they had received.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF AUTHOR AND RECIPIENTS

7. What were the circumstances of the author when he wrote? Paul had been in Ephesus for an extended period leading missionary efforts, teaching the Word, and training elders and workers (including Timothy). The ministry there was fruitful but not without opposition. Paul was in relative

1 Corinthians Lesson 1

Introduction Part 1

peace and stability compared to other seasons, yet he carried a deep pastoral burden for all the churches, especially Corinth.

8. What were the circumstances of those to whom he wrote? The church was not facing external persecution at this time. However, they had succumbed to the pressures and values of the surrounding pagan culture to a shocking degree. Despite being positionally “sanctified in Christ Jesus,” their thinking and behavior had regressed into factionalism, sexual immorality, greed, and disorder in worship. Corinth was a wealthy, cosmopolitan port city known for its immorality, status-consciousness, and philosophical pride, factors that deeply influenced the young church.

GLIMPSES INTO PAUL’S LIFE AND CHARACTER

9. What glimpses does the book give into the life and character of the author? Paul is firm but not harsh in the way he was in Galatians. He strongly asserts his apostolic authority and warns the arrogant that he will come soon to confront them (4:18-21). Yet throughout the letter he reveals a tender, fatherly heart. He calls the Corinthians “my beloved children” and reminds them that he became their father through the gospel (4:14-15). He expresses deep love and a desire to see them grow in maturity. The famous love chapter (13) flows naturally from this same pastoral heart. Paul models humility (focusing on Christ crucified rather than his own eloquence) while exercising the authority given him by the Lord.

CENTRAL TRUTH OF THE BOOK

The following passage captures the heart and burden of the entire letter:

1 Corinthians 4:14-20

“I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power.”

Paul writes as a spiritual father, not merely as a corrector. The kingdom of God is demonstrated in transformed lives and gospel power, not in eloquent speech or human wisdom. This sets the tone for the whole letter: firm correction rooted in deep love and a call to imitate Christ.

1 Corinthians Lesson 1

Introduction Part 1

LEADING IDEAS & MAJOR THEMES

The sixteen chapters present sequential doctrines designed to help the church at Corinth remember, reeducate, motivate, and admonish:

- Unity in Christ versus divisions and human wisdom (chs. 1–4)
- The wisdom of God revealed in the cross (1:18–2:16)
- Christ as the only foundation; rewards for faithful service (ch. 3)
- The problem of immorality and the need for church discipline (ch. 5)
- Lawsuits among believers and the sanctity of the body (ch. 6)
- Marriage, singleness, and sexual ethics (ch. 7)
- Christian liberty exercised in love for the weaker brother (chs. 8–10)
- Paul’s heart and example in evangelism and self-denial (ch. 9)
- Lessons from Israel’s history as warning (ch. 10)
- Order and edification in public worship, including head coverings and the Lord’s Supper (ch. 11)
- Spiritual gifts and the unity of the body of Christ (chs. 12–14)
- The supremacy of love (ch. 13)
- The centrality and certainty of bodily resurrection (ch. 15)
- Generosity, fellowship, and final exhortations (ch. 16)

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BOOK & INTERPRETIVE DIFFICULTIES

Characteristics: In many ways, 1 Corinthians is one of the hardest New Testament books to teach through because it is filled with disappointment and failure in the church. Yet it is also one of the most doctrinally rich and practically applicable letters we have. Paul shows us how the gospel speaks directly to the messiest problems in congregational life.

1 Corinthians Lesson 1

Introduction Part 1

Key Difficulties (to be addressed carefully in context during the verse-by-verse study):

- Chapter 3 – Are there “carnal Christians”? What is the difference between the natural, spiritual, and fleshly person?
- Chapter 5 – Church discipline: What does it mean to “remove the wicked person from among yourselves”? How should it be practiced today?
- Chapter 6 – “We will judge angels”? The meaning and scope of Christian liberty (“All things are lawful for me”)
- Chapter 11 – Head coverings for women in worship: cultural custom or abiding principle?
- Chapter 14 – The proper exercise of spiritual gifts (especially tongues and prophecy); the meaning of “women should keep silent in the churches”