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*"The Entrance of THY WORDS Giveth Light"*

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*Editor:* A. McDONALD REDWOOD

spite of its age is full of valuable material. Hegstenberg's work on the prophetic books should also be consulted. Speaking about the *age* of some of these books, it is well to bear in mind that the critics have *found no newer discovery* of better sources of evidence for their theories.

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## THE FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS

DR. W. GRAHAM SCROGGIE

Towards the end of the Apostle's stay at Corinth, an event happened which had far-reaching consequences for the Churches, there and everywhere. The Jews rose up against Paul, brought him before the judgment-seat, and charged him with disloyalty to their religious traditions. Gallio, brother of Seneca the philosopher, who had recently been appointed Proconsul of Achaia, refused to hear the case, and drove the Jews from the assembly. The Greeks and other bystanders then took Sosthenes, the ruler of the Synagogue, and beat him before Gallio, who exhibited the utmost indifference. Note that this Sosthenes was the spokesman of the *Jews* on this occasion, and may have been the successor of Crispus. The result of this affair was to give shelter to the infant Church, with opportunity of safe and continued growth; and as regards the Apostle himself, his credit rose with the disgrace of his opponents.

Shortly after this, Paul, leaving Timothy and Silas behind, sailed from the eastern port of Corinth to Ephesus, in company with Aquila and Priscilla. He spent a day or two at Ephesus, during which he reasoned with the Jews in the Synagogue, and then he proceeded to Caesarea and Jerusalem, having left Aquila and his wife at Ephesus.

At this juncture there arrived at Ephesus "a certain Jew named Apollos" as described in Acts 18:24, ff. He ministered in the Synagogue with much fervency of spirit, but he was ignorant of the enlarged, world-wide scope of the purposes of God, which were consequent upon the death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. Under the careful guidance and ministry of Priscilla and Aquila, however, he seems to have gained a new

understanding of the Gospel, and evidently became a most successful worker for God.

Here then, we have a brief summary of the founding of the Church at Corinth, and see something of the environment in which it had to grow, surrounded on all sides by that which appealed not to the spirit, but to the flesh, and in a degree scarcely imaginable to any who have never been in a city of the character described, where moral conventions are not recognized or even known. With this picture in mind as a background, it is an immense advantage to study the Letter and note all the allusions and references where the Apostle has to use stern and urgent language of rebuke because of the effects made upon these Christians by their environment.

## 2. *The Occasion and Object of the Letter*

It is of the first importance, in the study of any of these New Testament letters, that we should get a clear and comprehensive idea of those circumstances and conditions which occasioned it; and also, of the type, or types of persons to whom it was sent. Paul did not write I Corinthians for the 20th century, nor for Christians in a Christian land, but he wrote it for the 1st century, and for Christians in a heathen land.

That such a letter should be a burning message to us and our time, is proof that it is no ordinary correspondence, but is a work of God. But our own portion in the Epistle will not be diminished by a fuller knowledge of what was the Corinthians' portion, and the Apostle's first intention in it. It is this which we are now to seek.

### (1) *The Occasion of the Letter*

#### i. A Report from Corinth. 1:11; 5:1; 11:18.

*a.* Paul, on his second missionary journey, visited Corinth, and remained there for eighteen months. The time we are now considering is nearly four years later (A.D. 57), and the Apostle is on his *third journey*.

*b.* Of the four years spent on this journey three were spent at Ephesus (Acts 20:31, 19), from whence Paul wrote his First Epistle to the Corinthians.

*c.* During his residence at Ephesus he received accounts from

the people of a certain lady, Chloe by name, of the schismatic spirit that was so powerful at that time among these Corinthians (1:11). In view of this report, Paul sent Timothy and Erastus to Corinth, by way of Macedonia, in the hope that, by their presence and counsel, this sectarian spirit might disappear (4:16; 16:10; Acts 19:22).

d. After Timothy's departure, a deputation of three men reached Ephesus from Corinth, by name, *Stephanus*, *Fortunatus*, and *Achaicus* (16:17, 18). These brethren brought the Apostle a detailed account of the condition of things in the Church from which they came; a report which filled the Apostle with grief and indignation (5:1; 11:18; 2 Cor. 2:4).

e. The prevailing evils of these Christians, reported by these brethren, were five in number: (1st) *Schism*. (2nd) *Lack of Discipline*. (3rd) *Litigation*. (4th) *Unchastity*. (5th) *Profanity*.

1st. *Schism*. Chapter 1:12.

The unity of the assembly was completely destroyed by the insistence of certain factions.

Four parties contended for the leadership at Corinth:—

The *Paul-Party*. These, no doubt, were chiefly composed of Gentile Christians, who were the converts of the Apostle, and who were disposed to carry his doctrine of Christian liberty to a dangerous extreme.

The *Apollos-Party*. Two passages of Scripture will serve to indicate the occasion of this party—1 Cor. 2:1, and Acts 18:24, 28. Paul, at Corinth, had purposely renounced all excellency of speech and wisdom, all the arts of human oratory. But Apollos, being an Alexandrian Jew, and more ornate and rhetorical than Paul, had, no doubt, employed his eloquence and Alexandrian wisdom in preaching the Gospel at Corinth, and this had proved eminently pleasing to the Grecian mind and taste. Those, therefore, who loved brilliancy of style and philosophical subtleties in public discourse, spoke of themselves as "of Apollos."

The *Cephas-Party*. These were the Judaising faction of the Church, and the great opponents of Paul and his teaching. They were Jews who insisted that the Mosaic law should be imposed upon the Gentiles. Peter was not at all responsible for them, but, because he was the Apostle of the Circumcision, they took his name as best expressive of their particular teaching.

The *Christ-Party*. It appears that this was a party which repudiated all the others, by casting off all human authority, and refusing to recognize Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or anyone else; and which arrogated to themselves exclusively the name of Christian. It would seem that the Apostle especially denounces these in his Second Letter to Corinth (10:11).

2nd. *Lack of Discipline*. Chapter 5:1-2.

The brethren from Corinth reported a gross and flagrant case of incest in the Church, such as shocked even the immoral Corinthians. But, what raised the indignation of the Apostle, was the fact that the Church had not dealt with the case, but seemed, rather, to have paraded it.

3rd. *Litigation*. Chapter 6:1-11.

Serious disputes, we are not told about what, were occurring between members of the Corinthian Church, and, instead of submitting those disputes to Christian arbitration, the members were summoning one another before the heathen tribunals. The damage done to the cause of Christ in Corinth by such a course, would be simply inestimable.

4th. *Unchastity*. Chapter 6:12-20.

The state of affairs so thinly veiled in this section must be regarded in the light of all we know of heathen idea and practice, and must not be judged in the light of civilized Western ideas and ideals.

Grecian philosophy taught that "man was the measure of all things," and that everything that ministered to the gratification of his natural appetite, was, in itself, good. Thus profligacy was no worse than eating food to appease hunger (6:13, 14).

The converts from heathenism, in the Corinthian Church, had not yet altogether broken away from their former ideas and habits; and in the absence of the strong presence and counsel of their leaders, they had resorted to the old life of sin.

5th. *Profanity*. Chapter 11:17-34.

Before the celebration of the Lord's Supper, a fraternal feast was held, which early received the name of *Love Feast* or *Agape*.

At this there were rich and poor, freemen and slaves. This occasion was shamefully abused by the Church at Corinth, for the rich instead of ministering to the needs of their poorer brethren,

ate and drank what they had provided for themselves, "whilst their half-starved slaves, who had little or nothing of their own to bring, watched with hatred and envy their full-fed brethren."

But worse, even, than that, the rich became surfeited and drunken, and "had been seen to stretch drunken hands to the very chalice of the Lord" (11:21).

Such then, was the report brought by those brethren to Paul, and these facts constituted the occasion very largely, of the writing of this Letter. But we have now to consider another matter.

## ii. A Letter from Corinth 7:1.

a. The three brethren from Corinth who related these things to Paul, brought also a letter from the Church there, a letter in which the opinion of the Apostle was solicited on a number of matters which were greatly disturbing the peace of the Church (7:1).

b. The tone and substance of this communication may be gathered from the Apostle's reply to it in the Epistle before us. There does not seem to have been any confession of the disorderly state of affairs in the Church, nor any expression of sorrow for their spiritual declension; to the contrary, a spirit of reserve and self-complacency pervaded it throughout. (Compare 4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4.)

"But the inflated self-assurance of its tone did not disguise from Paul the uneasy indication that his new converts were in a perilous moral state."

c. The matters about which the Corinthians wrote to Paul appear to be seven in number, and are indicated, for the most part, by the recurrence of the words,

### "Now Concerning".

These seven matters are concerning:—

- (a) *Marriage and Celibacy.*
- (b) *Eating Meats Sacrificed to Idols.*
- (c) *The Conduct of Women in Public Worship.*
- (d) *The Exercise of the Spiritual Gifts.*
- (e) *The Orderly Conduct of Meetings.*
- (f) *The Reality and Nature of the Resurrection.*
- (g) *The Collection for the Saints.*

We must just glance at the nature of each of these matters.

(a) *Concerning Marriage and Celibacy.* Ch. 7.

There seems to have been a party in the Church who, in opposition to the boundless licentiousness of the time, were advocating the annulling of the marriage relationship, and enjoying the state of celibacy. The Corinthians wrote to ask:—

Was married life right or wrong?

Were mixed marriages to be allowed?

Was it better not to be married?

Ought fathers to give their daughters in marriage, or not?

Were second marriages permissible?

There can be no doubt that the enquiry upon each aspect of this subject found its occasion in the practice of members of the Church.

(b) *Concerning Eating Meats Sacrificed to Idols.* Chapters 8—11:1

In connection with heathen worship at Corinth, feasts were held in the idols' temples, and at the feasts portions of the animals offered in sacrifice were eaten by the worshippers. Most of the members of the Corinthian Church were converts from heathenism, and so no longer engaged in these feasts on their own account. But at times they were invited to attend them in a social way by their heathen neighbours. The question was:—

Might the Christians accept the invitations and eat of such meats, or should they not?

Some contended that as the idols were nothing, meats offered to them differed in no respect from other meats; and consequently they were quite at liberty to go, when invited, to these feasts. Others took a contrary view.

(c) *Concerning the Conduct of Women in Public Worship.* Chapters 11:1, 16; 14:31-36.

What does emerge clearly from these two passages is the fact that there was a lack of propriety and decorum on the part of the Christian women at Corinth. They were dispensing with their veils in public meetings, and, it would seem, were taking a part in the public ministrations which was neither becoming nor warrantable.



(d) *Concerning the Exercise of the Spiritual Gifts.* Chapters 12—14.

We learn from the Apostle himself that the Church at Corinth was richly endowed in the matter of spiritual gifts (Ch. 1:5-7). But in the absence of spirituality there was considerable abuse in the employment of these gifts.

In particular, those who had the gift of tongues claimed to be superior to those who could prophesy only, and an unholy rivalry had been generated. The more sober gifts were despised, or at least relegated to a subordinate place, and the more spectacular gifts were paraded.

(e) *Concerning the Orderly Conduct of Meetings.* Chapter 14:26-40.

The grossest irregularities had crept into the prayer and conference meetings of the Church of Corinth. Their meeting-place had become a battle-ground of contending factions and rival oratory. Numbers of persons might be heard all speaking at the same time, and even then, speaking what neither they nor anyone else could understand. So disorderly indeed were these gatherings at times, that any chance visitor coming into the assembly would have concluded that the members were a number of maniacs.

(f) *Concerning the Reality and Nature of the Resurrection.* Chapter 15.

There were some in the Corinthian Church who were denying the fact of a physical resurrection, regarding all references to such as purely spiritual in character.

Others, it would appear, who were not disposed to receive this doctrine, were much perplexed, nevertheless, with the material difficulties which surrounded the subject.

(g) *Concerning the Collection for the Saints.* Chapter 16.

Paul had no doubt given the Church instructions with regard to this matter when he was at Corinth, but, it would seem, they had mentioned the matter in the letter they had written to Paul, and desired to know more particularly what they were to do, and how the money was to be conveyed.

These seven matters were submitted to the Apostle for his judgment, and they, together with the reports which had reached him, gave him abundant cause for grave anxiety.

d. What should he do? True, Timothy was on his way to Corinth, but the state of affairs was so much worse than the

Apostle had imagined, that the visit of his companion must prove inadequate to the need.

Should he go himself and deal with them? Had he not already promised to pay them a visit (in a letter which is lost; cf. 1 Cor. 5:9 and 2 Cor. 1:13 ff), and had not the time now fully come?

Yet, upon reflection, Paul felt that if he went at once, he could have nothing but words of severe censure for the Church, and he was reluctant to meet them with such a spirit (2 Cor. 1:23—2:3, and 1 Cor. 4:19—21).

e. He was resolved what to do. He would write them a letter, dealing both with the reports and their questions; and would send it to them by the hand of Titus and the three brethren who, by crossing the sea, would arrive at Corinth before Timothy. He would tell them that Timothy was coming, and that he himself would follow shortly (4:14—19; 16:10, 11).

So Titus was despatched with the instructions to return to him, Paul, as soon as possible, and report what effect the letter had had on the Church (2 Cor. 2:12, 13; 7:5—7).

These then were the circumstances which occasioned this First Letter to the Corinthians.

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## THE LIMITS OF CRITICISM

The one thing criticism can never expunge from this book, the Bible, is what we speak of as *the Gospel*—its continuous, coherent, self-attesting discovery to man of the mind of God regarding man himself, his sin, the guilt and ruin into which sin has plunged him, and over against that the method of a divine salvation, the outcome of a purpose of eternal love, wrought out in ages of progressive revelation, and culminating in the mission, life, death, atoning work, and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ, in the gift of His Spirit to the Church and believers. Here also is a fact—the biggest and most solid fact in the universe—a fact patent on the face of Scripture to any who reads with open eyes, intertwined with ages of Christian experience with enduring institutions, with efforts and achievements, which furnish a continuous proof of its reality. So long as this fact stands, the Scriptures which, in their diverse parts and divers manners, embody and convey to us this revelation of God, and by the verifiable presence of this revelation in them, the Scriptures are proved to be, what they claim to be, the living and inspired oracles of God. 2 Tim. 3:15—17. These statements are made with clear recognition that it is precisely these evangelical doctrines which, in the "modern view" of Christianity, are swept away.—*Professor James Orr, M.A., D.D.*