

Reading Corinthians

A Literary and Theological Commentary
Revised Edition

Charles H. Talbert

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To my family, from whom I have learned the meaning
of inaugurated eschatology

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Author's Preface

Preface to the Second Edition

After more than a dozen years since the original edition of *Reading Corinthians*, readers still request its availability, prompting this second edition in a revised and updated form. The essential approach taken in the first edition has not been altered. Revisions include updating the bibliography, answering questions raised by discussions since 1987, providing expanded support from ancient sources for positions taken, and generally profiting from more than a decade of scholarship on the Corinthian correspondence. It is my hope that this new edition of *Reading Corinthians* will be of even greater service to those seeking to read these two Pauline writings with understanding and empathy.

—Pentecost 2002

Preface to the First Edition

That this volume was completed during the spring semester, 1986, was due to a Reynolds Research Fellowship from Wake Forest University and a grant from its Graduate Council. The research for the book was done largely in connection with my teaching of exegetical courses on the Corinthian correspondence over the past decade. The students at Wake Forest University who have taken these courses have served as a stimulus for my learning and deserve my sincere thanks. My thinking about many of the key issues was clarified by dialogue with my peers in the Catholic Biblical Association during two continuing seminars, one on 1 Corinthians in 1984 and the other on 2 Corinthians in 1985. Incentives for putting parts of the whole together were furnished by the opportunity to write an article for *Perspectives on the New Testament: Essays in Honor of Frank Stagg* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), by the invitation to produce a paper on Paul and the Covenants for a symposium on the New Testament and Judaism at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, April 1986, and by the privilege of

giving the Sprinkle Lectures at Atlantic Christian College in March 1986. No contribution to this volume has been more significant than that of our family's dinnertime theological dialogues, which, over the past decade, have often focused on the issues raised by the Corinthian correspondence. To all of those who have assisted me in attempting to produce a book that I hope will introduce a reader with little or no knowledge of the biblical languages to the text itself—as opposed to literature about the text—I say thanks.

—*Pentecost 1986*

Introduction

Like its predecessor, *Reading Luke*, this volume does not follow the word-by-word, phrase-by-phrase, verse-by-verse method of traditional commentaries. Rather it is concerned to understand large thought units and their relationship to Pauline thought as a whole. The focus, moreover, is on a close reading of the text. Although the author's dialogue with the Corinthian correspondence is carried on in light of the history of interpretation, the commentary makes little reference to secondary literature. Its aim is not to direct one through the maze of scholarship but to make one feel at home in the biblical text itself. If one wants to use a traditional research commentary alongside this volume, one should consider *I Corinthians* (Conzelmann 1975) and *2 Corinthians* (Furnish 1984). Throughout, this volume attempts to take to heart the advice of Clifford Geertz (1973, 18):

A good interpretation of anything—a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society—takes us to the heart of that of which it is an interpretation. When it does not do that, but leads us instead somewhere else . . . it may have its intrinsic charms; but it is something else than what the task at hand . . . calls for.

At the heart of the Corinthian correspondence are two things that demand attention: *what* is said and *how* it is said. Numerous directions of scholarship facilitate investigation into the mode of Pauline expression.

First, recent research has paid renewed attention to the study of ancient letters (cf. *Semeia* 1981, where the entire issue is devoted to Studies in Ancient Letter Writing). Pseudo-Demetrius in *Epistolary Types* lists twenty-one types of letters: friendly, commendatory, blaming, reproachful, consoling, censorious, admonishing, threatening, vituperative, praising, advisory, supplicatory, inquiring, responding, allegorical, accounting, accusing, apologetic, congratulatory, ironic, thankful (Malherbe 1977). Paul's letters,

like many other ancient epistles, were usually a mixture of such types. For example, in the places in 1 Corinthians where Paul responds to the Corinthians' letter to him, he follows a responding type; in 1 Cor 5, he is censorious; in 2 Cor 1:8–2:13, accounting; in 2 Cor 8–9, advisory; in 1 Cor 4 and 2 Cor 12–13, threatening; and in 2 Cor 2:14–6:10, apologetic. Fitzgerald (1990) argues that 2 Cor 10–13 is a mixed letter type.

Second, recent New Testament study has also worked on the relevance of ancient rhetoric to the Pauline epistles (Kennedy 1984). From such study one learns that 1 Corinthians is largely deliberative rhetoric; that is, it aims at effecting a decision about future action. Second Cor 1–7 is mainly judicial rhetoric; that is, it seeks to bring about a judgment of past events. While 2 Cor 8–9 is deliberative, 2 Cor 10–13 is epideictic rhetoric; that is, it is the oratory of praise or blame, celebrating or condemning someone or something. In other words, just as the epistolary types are mixed in the Corinthian correspondence, so is the rhetoric.

Third, one of the features of the Corinthian correspondence noted for a long time and reemphasized by recent study is the use of quotations from the Corinthians, either from their letter to Paul or from the oral reports that had reached the apostle. These quotations function as a springboard for Paul's directives, for example, 6:12; 10:23; 6:13; 7:1; 8:1; 8:4, 8:5-6; 8:8; 11:2 (Hurd 1983, 65-74). Sometimes the quotations sound like the diatribe form of antiquity. For example, 2 Cor 10:10—"One says, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account'" (cf. Epictetus 4.9.5-6: "And what do I lose? one says. Man, you used to be modest, and are no longer so; have you lost nothing?"). At other times, the remarks are not introduced by a recognizable phrase (like "one says") and must be recognized by their discontinuity with Paul's general stance and continuity with that of the Corinthians. This, of course, was also characteristic of the diatribe (Kustas 1976, 11). Apparently, just as Tertullian cited selections from Marcion before answering him, so Paul referred to Corinthian assertions before responding. Recognition of this fact is a major factor in a proper reading of the Corinthian correspondence.

Fourth, no close reading of the text is possible without an awareness of the ancient techniques of inclusion, or ring composition, and of chiasmus, or concentric patterning. In an oral culture, there was a need for some technique to signal the beginning and ending of a thought unit. Whereas in a literary culture paragraphs, chapters, subheadings, or even enumeration designate such boundaries, in an oral culture the signals had to be heard. It was customary to repeat key words, phrases, and ideas at the start and finish of a thought unit to indicate its boundaries. This we call inclusion, or ring

composition. Sometimes the beginning and end of an excursus were so similar that modern scholars have contended that, if the excursus were taken out, the two edges would join naturally; hence the excursus is an interpolation. This is an improper inference. Josephus offers an illustration (*Antiquities* 18.5.2§ 116, 119). The paragraph is an excursus on the death of John the Baptist. It begins, “Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod’s army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did.” It ends, “Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of the army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God’s displeasure.” Similar examples are found in 1 Cor 12:31 and 14:1; in 2 Cor 11:1 and 16; and in 2 Cor 6:11-13 and 7:2. The function of such a framing technique was to mark the boundaries of a thought unit.

Another device used not only to signal the beginning and end of a thought unit but to indicate the arrangement within the unit was chiasmus, or concentric patterning. Stated abstractly, such an arrangement runs ABCB’A’ or ABB’A’. It might involve asking several questions (ABC) and then answering them in reverse order (C’B’A’), as in 1 Cor 1:13 and 1:14–4:7. It might involve the organization of a paragraph as in 1 Cor 7:2-5, the arrangement of a section as in 1 Cor 8–10, or the pattern of an entire letter as in 2 Cor 10–13. This technique was widespread in antiquity (Welch 1981); it was also used extensively by Paul (Collins 1963, 575-84). Recognition of this principle of organization in the Corinthian correspondence often allows one to avoid the cliché that Paul’s thought is disjointed when it does not seem to follow a linear line of argument. Recognition of these various modes of Pauline expression enables one to understand better *how* the apostle writes.

Each section of this commentary aims not only to explicate how Paul said what he said but above all to clarify *what* he said. Paul’s Corinthian letters are religious documents. What this means is stated concisely by Jacob Neusner (1983, 143):

Even though, through philology, we understand every word of a text, and, through history, we know just what happened in the event or time to which the text testifies, we still do not understand that text. A religious text serves not merely the purposes of philology or history. It demands its proper place as a statement of religion. Read as anything but a statement of religion, it is misunderstood.

Some readers may wish to proceed at this point directly to the commentary’s first section. Others will wish to know more about the background of 1 and 2 Corinthians, namely, about the city of Corinth, the various letters to

Corinth, and Paul's opponents in Corinth. For such readers the following pages of the introduction are designed.

Corinth

The Corinth Paul visited in the middle of the first century was a city with no old traditions. In 146 BC the old Greek city of Corinth was destroyed by the Roman consul Mummius. The walls and buildings were demolished, and anything flammable was burned (Dio Cassius *Roman History* 21; Pausanias *Description of Greece* 7.16.7). The inhabitants who were not slain were sold into slavery (Dio Cassius, 21). Many of its art treasures were sent to Italy (Strabo *Geography* 8.6.23). Cicero, who saw the destroyed city approximately 79–77 BC, said scarcely a trace remained of it (*Tusculan Disputations* 3.53; *On the Agrarian Law* 2.87). In 44 BC Julius Caesar refounded Corinth as a Roman colony (Dio Cassius 143.50.3-5; Pausanias 2.1.2; 2.3.1). The Roman settlement was by poor freedmen for the most part (Strabo 8.6.23; Appian *History* 8.136), a fact lamented by the Greek Crinagoras (*Greek Anthology* 9.284). In 27 BC Augustus made Corinth the capital of the Roman province of Achaia and the residence of the governor (Dio Chrysostom *Oration* 37.8). Claudius, in AD 44, returned the control of Achaia and Macedonia to the Senate (Suetonius "Claudius" 35.3). Corinth remained the capital from which the proconsul sent out annually from Rome ruled.

Economically Corinth was a wealthy city. Its geographical location was no small reason for its prosperity. It was a maritime city with two harbors, one leading to Asia (Cenchraea), the other to Italy (Lechaeum). Profits were to be made from trade (Strabo 8.6.20), from travel (Dio Chrysostom 37.8.36; Philostratus *Life of Apollonius* 7.10), from banking (Plutarch *De Vitando Aere Alieno* 7), from bronze making (Pliny *Natural History* 34.1.6-8; Josephus *Life* 68; Pliny *Letters* 3.6), and from the Isthmian games held every two years (Pausanias, 2.2.2; Dio Chrysostom, 8.5-10; Aelius Aristides *Orations* 46.23) (Theissen 1982; Murphy-O'Connor 1983).

Religiously Corinth was a center of diversity. There were pagan cults of every stripe: Apollo, Athena, Poseidon, Hera, Aphrodite, Heracles, Jupiter, Capitolinus, Asklepios, Isis, and Serapis (Broneer 1951, 77-96; Smith 1977, 201-31). Greek philosophers plied their wares as well (Dio Chrysostom, 8.5-10). There was a Jewish settlement in Corinth (Philo *Embassy to Gaius* 281). It is no surprise, therefore, to hear of a synagogue there (Acts 18:4) and to learn that an inscription reading "Synagogue of the Hebrews" has been found (*IDB*, 1:684). A Christian community in Corinth from the middle of the first century would have simply added to this diversity.

The Christian church in Corinth at the time of the correspondence with Paul was small. J. Murphy-O'Connor estimates about fifty persons (1983, 156-57). It reflected a fair cross section of the urban society. Some of its members had social standing: Crispus (Acts 18:8; 1 Cor 1:14) was a synagogue ruler and had a house; Sosthenes (Acts 18:17; 1 Cor 1:1) was a synagogue ruler; Erastus (Rom 16:23) was the city treasurer; Gaius (Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 1:14) had a house large enough to accommodate the whole church; Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16; 16:15) had a house; some (1 Cor 6:1) had enough money to engage in legal proceedings. Most did not have such social standing (1 Cor 1:26-29; 11:22). Apparently the church was not poverty-stricken, because Paul presumed that all could make some contribution to the collection for the poor in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:2; 2 Cor 8:1-6). The church was composed of both Jews and Gentiles (1 Cor 1:22-24). It was not composed exclusively of Christian households; 1 Cor 7:12-16 indicates some were married to unbelievers. As with other Pauline churches, the Corinthian community met in private houses (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:5; Phlm 2; Col 4:15). A distinction must be made between "the church in the house of" and "the whole church." The former was the basic cell (cf. 1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:5); the latter was the assembly of the various cells on occasion (Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 11:20; 14:23) (Meeks 1983, 75-76). One of these cells may have been the church in Cenchræa of which Phoebe was a deaconess (Rom 16:1).

According to Acts 18:12 Paul's initial visit to Corinth, during which time the church was established (1 Cor 15:1-2), coincided in part with the term of office of the Roman governor Gallio. It is the one fixed point in determining the approximate dates of the Corinthian correspondence. From an inscription found at Delphi it appears that Gallio probably became governor in July AD 51 and did not serve more than one year (Deissmann 1975; Murphy-O'Connor, 1983, 141-52). If this is accurate, then, assuming Acts 18:11 (Paul stayed eighteen months), the apostle may have arrived in Corinth early in AD 50 and late in AD 51. His stay in Ephesus may then have been AD 53-55 and his arrival in Corinth for the last time in 55 or 56. Although exactitude in dating is impossible, the probabilities are that Paul's dealings with Corinth took place in the first half of the fifties.

The Letters

Although the authenticity of the Corinthian letters is not questioned, the integrity is, especially of 2 Corinthians. The diversity of opinion is startling. For example:

a three-letter hypothesis

- 1 Cor 6:14–7:1
- 1 Cor
- 2 Cor (so McNeile 1953); or 1 Cor; 2 Cor 1–9; 2 Cor 10–13 (so Barrett 1973; Bruce 1971; Furnish 1984)

a four-letter hypothesis

- 2 Cor 6:14–7:1
- 1 Cor
- 2 Cor 10–13
- 2 Cor 1–9 (so Manson 1962)

a five-letter hypothesis

- 1 Cor 10:1–23; 6:12–20; 11:2–34; 16:7, 8–9, 20–21; 2 Cor 6:14–7:1
- 1 Cor 7; 8; 9; 10:24–11:1; 12; 13; 14; 15; 16:1–6, 15–19
- 1 Cor 1:1–9; 1:10–6:11; 16:10–14, 22–23
- 2 Cor 2:14–6:13; 7:2–4; 10–13
- 2 Cor 1:1–2:13; 7:5–16; 9 (so Weiss 1959, I/2)

a six-letter hypothesis

- 2 Cor 6:14–7:1; 1 Cor 9:24–10:22; 6:12–20; 11:2–34; 15; 16:13–24
- 1 Cor 1:1–6:11; 7:1–9:23; 10:23–11:1; 12:1–14:40; 16:1–12
- 2 Cor 2:14–6:13; 7:2–4
- 2 Cor 10:1–13:13
- 2 Cor 9:1–15
- 2 Cor 1:1–2:13; 7:5–8:24 (so Schmithals 1971)

a nine-letter hypothesis

- 1 Cor 11:2–34
- 1 Cor 6:1–11; 2 Cor 6:14–7:1; 1 Cor 6:12–20; 9:24–10:22; 15:1–58; 16:13–24
- 1 Cor 5:1–13; 7:1–8:13; 9:19–22; 10:23–11:1; 12:1–31a; 14:1c–40; 12:31b–13:13; 16:1–12
- 1 Cor 1:1–4:21
- 2 Cor 2:14–6:2

- 1 Cor 9:1-18; 2 Cor 6:3-13; 7:2-4
- 2 Cor 10:1-13:13
- 2 Cor 9:1-15
- 2 Cor 1:1-2:13; 7:5-8:24 (so Schmithals 1973, 263-88)

This sampling is representative but far from exhaustive.

There are still some who argue for the unity of both 1 and 2 Corinthians, for example, Phillip E. Hughes (1962). (The scheme of 2 Corinthians concerns Paul's itinerary relative to Corinth, viewed in its various aspects: past—the change of plan, chs. 1–7; present—the sending of Titus and the brethren to complete the collection, chs. 8–9; and future—the imminence of the apostle's arrival in Corinth, chs. 10–13 [Lambrecht, 1990; Amador, 2000].)

This commentary works with the assumption that 1 Corinthians is a unit, but that 2 Corinthians is composed of two separate letters: 2 Cor 10–13 and 2 Cor 1–9. Certain things in 2 Cor 10–13 seem to precede 1–9: for example, 12:11 precedes 3:1 and 5:12; 13:2 precedes 1:23; 13:10 precedes 2:3, 4, and 9; 10:6 precedes 2:9 and 7:15; also, 11:3 is strange if written after the satisfaction expressed in chapters 1–7. These directional indicators cannot be reversed by the identification of Titus's visits in 2 Cor 8:6, 16-23 and 2 Cor 12:18. These are not the same visit. In 8:16-23 Titus is accompanied by two brethren; in 12:17-18 by one brother. It is further assumed by this commentary that 2 Cor 10–13 is the painful letter of 2 Cor 2:3-4, 9; 7:8, 12 (Horrell, 1996, 296-312). The objection that the offense committed against Paul that occasioned the painful letter is not mentioned in 2 Cor 10–13 will not hold. An individual member of the Corinthian church perpetrated the offense (2:6; 7:12) but also involved sympathizers from the church at large (7:7-9, 12). Second Cor 10–13 does respond to this matter, especially in 10:1-11 and 11:2-11 (Watson 1984, 324-46). The objection that 2 Corinthians 1–7 does not refer to the problems that have now been solved is answered when one understands an ancient conciliatory letter. In antiquity, a conciliatory epistle intentionally avoids, insofar as possible, mention of the cause of the strife. This corresponds with the understanding of reconciliation in the Greco-Roman world. Reconciliation was held to consist in an act of deliberate forgetfulness (Welborn, 1995, 138-53).

The chronology of Paul's dealings with Corinth would look something like this:

1st visit to Corinth (echoed in 1 Cor 15:1-3; 4:15; cf. Acts 18)

1st letter of Paul to Corinth (mentioned in 1 Cor 5:9-11), no longer extant

Letter from Corinth to Paul (1 Cor 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12) and oral report to Paul by Chloe's people (1 Cor 1:11-12)

2nd letter of Paul to Corinth (1 Corinthians), written from Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8) and delivered by Timothy (1 Cor 16:10; 4:17)

2nd visit of Paul to Corinth, the painful visit (2 Cor 2:1). This was not the visit projected in 1 Cor 16:1-9 to gather the collection but an additional visit. It was painful because someone at Corinth (2 Cor 2:5-8, 10; 7:12) challenged his authority. Instead of forcing a showdown, Paul withdrew to Macedonia and did not return to Corinth as promised (2 Cor 1:15-16, 23; 2:1).

3rd letter of Paul to Corinth (2 Cor 2:3, 4, 9; 7:8, 12). This letter was in lieu of the promised visit (2 Cor 1:15, 16, 23). Its contents may be inferred from 2 Cor 1-7, which was written after the severe letter had done its work. First, it dealt with the individual's challenge of Paul's apostolic authority and the community's implication in it (2 Cor 2:5-9; 7:12); second, it included Paul's commendation of himself (2 Cor 3:1; 5:12). It is, in part, preserved in 2 Cor 10-13, which not only responds to the charges of the individual and his sympathizers (2 Cor 10:1-11; 11:2-15) but is also an exercise in inoffensive self-praise (2 Cor 11:1, 16-12:13). It also expresses concern about problems of behavior that remain uncorrected (2 Cor 12:21; 13:2). This letter was carried by Titus (2 Cor 7:13-14).

After his visit to Corinth, Titus met Paul in Macedonia with news that the letter had done its work and the church had disciplined the offender (2 Cor 7:6-13a; 2:5-11).

4th letter of Paul to Corinth (2 Cor 1-9), written from Macedonia and delivered by Titus (2 Cor 8:1-6, 17). This letter rejoices in the settlement of the issue over the individual's challenge of Paul's authority (2 Cor 2:5-11; 7:6-13a); gives the Corinthians a basis for answering those who boast in external appearances (2 Cor 5:12; so

2:14–7:5); calls for correction of behavior that is not proper for Christians (2 Cor 6:14–7:1); and urges completion of the collection in Corinth before Paul arrives (2 Cor 8–9).

3rd visit of Paul to Corinth. This visit fulfilled the purpose of the projected visit of 1 Cor 16:1-9 (cf. Rom 15:25-27). Also during this time Paul wrote Romans (Rom 16:23).

If it is proposed that 2 Cor 10–13 is a separate and earlier letter than 2 Cor 1–9, then the question arises as to why the two independent units were joined in the way that they are. There are two levels to any answer to such a question. First, the combination of the two parts into a whole most likely took place at the time when Paul's letters were collected, edited, and published (i.e., near AD 100). Second, two different explanations are offered for the principle of editorial activity. On the one hand, G. Bornkamm (1962, 258-64) has argued that the placing of 2 Cor 10–13 last was done in line with a basic formal rule of early Christian edificatory literature: namely, that the warnings against false teachers are often expressed at the end of a writing or a fragment of a writing (e.g., Jude 17-19; 2 Pet 3:3-7; Heb 13:9; Rev 22:18-19; Didache 16; Matt 7:15-23, as the end of the Sermon on the Mount; Rom 16:17-20). Behind the formal rule stands the acknowledged view that the appearance of false prophets was a sign of the last times. By placing 2 Cor 10–13 after 2 Cor 1–9 the editor was saying that Paul's opponents were false prophets. On the other hand, Furnish (1984, 40) suggests that the principle may have been simply that of adding the shorter to the longer. This was certainly one of the principles followed in the ancient arrangement of Paul's letters now reflected in our New Testaments (the shorter follows the longer, e.g., 1 Corinthians is shorter than Romans, 2 Corinthians is shorter than 1 Corinthians). Either explanation, singly or in conjunction with the other, offers a plausible, though unprovable, reason for the present shape of canonical 2 Corinthians.

Paul's Opponents

Preoccupation with the identity of Paul's opponents has characterized much of the research done on the Pauline epistles. Opinion has shifted from the position that the opponents are the same in both 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians (emissaries from Jerusalem, so F. C. Baur; Jewish-Christian Gnostics, so W. Schmithals) to that which regards them as different in the two letters (proto-gnostics in 1 Corinthians, Hellenistic-Jewish Christian itinerants in 2 Corinthians, so D. Georgi). (See Gunther 1973 for a survey of

options.) The research that has gone into production of this commentary has shown that in neither case can the problem be reduced to a single cause or set of opponents. In 1 Corinthians one finds a number of factors behind the problems: for example, overrealized eschatology (1 Cor 4; 7; 11; 15); the effects of social stratification (1 Cor 8–10; 11); misunderstanding of Paul's earlier letter (1 Cor 5); divisions due to allegiance to different leaders growing in part out of the scattered character of the various church groups or cells in Corinth; a carryover of Jewish norms that were contrary to Christian practice (e.g., 1 Cor 14:34–36). It is impossible to reduce all of the issues dealt with in 1 Corinthians to one cause like Gnosticism or overrealized eschatology.

The same is true for 2 Cor 10–13. The problems cannot be reduced to a single source, visiting apostles. On the painful visit to Corinth, Paul apparently did not discipline the arrogant Christians as he had said he would in 1 Cor 4:18–21. This lack of exercise of authority by Paul when present in Corinth caused one of the Corinthians to challenge his apostolic authority (2 Cor 10:1–11) and to make a depreciating comparison of Paul with the other apostles who had visited Corinth and who had acted with authority. This comparison used against Paul his unwillingness to accept money. Although the authoritative visitors had accepted funds, Paul did not. This showed his awareness of his lack of stature, or it revealed that he did not love the Corinthians, or it was a sign of his duplicity since he was absorbed with the collection (2 Cor 11:7–11; 12:16–17). As if to confirm the challenge to his authority, Paul withdrew to Macedonia and failed to return to Corinth as promised (2 Cor 1:15–16), prompting charges of vacillation on his part. What began with one individual's challenge grew as sympathizers joined his suspicions. The letter of tears (2 Cor 10–13) acknowledged that moral problems remained in Corinth (12:21; 13:2) and repeated the threats of 1 Cor 4:18–21 that such would be punished (2 Cor 12:21; 13:2–4; 10:11) when Paul came again. That he did not act decisively before was because he was waiting for the Corinthians themselves, as a group, to manifest their obedience—that is, their identification with his point of view (2 Cor 10:5–6). The letter also dealt with the disparaging comparison between Paul and the other apostles by an exercise in inoffensive self-praise (11:1, 16–12:13). In more than one place, Paul also tried to straighten out the misunderstandings about his attitude over accepting money (11:7–11; 12:16–18). Second Cor 10–13, then, deals not only with problems posed by outsiders but even more so with that presented by a Corinthian individual and his sympathizers in the church.

Second Cor 1–9 likewise can be understood only in terms of multiple problems with no single cause. The letter begins with an attempt to dispel a bad impression of Paul created by his failure to return to Corinth from Macedonia as promised (1:15-18). It rejoices in the resolution of the issue of the individual's challenge to Paul's apostolic authority and the community's complicity in the matter (2:5-11; 7:8, 12). It offers the Corinthians the grounds for answering those who boast in external appearances (5:12, so 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 for the most part). It continues the appeal to some Corinthians to repent of their overidentification with the pagan culture (6:14–7:1). It finally appeals to the Corinthians for the completion of preparations for the collection before Paul's arrival (2 Cor 8–9). Even here an apologetic note is heard. The administrative procedure for the collection is to be circumspect (8:20-21). Second Cor 1–9, then, is more than celebration over the resolution of the problems dealt with in chapters 10–13. It continues the Pauline apology, though in muted terms, at the same time that it celebrates the official resolution of the crisis. Both apology and rejoicing serve the same end, that of the completion of the Corinthians' part in the collection.

There is a difference between what a text says and what that text meant. Since what a text meant is determined by the context in which it was said, it is necessary for the modern reader to inquire about context, despite the difficulty. This is true not only for the larger cultural context (hence this volume's quest for parallels) but also for the ecclesiastical context (hence this volume's interest in the positions of the Corinthians). To reject the attempt to discern why something was said using the slogan "No mirror reading" is, by default, to reduce one's reading of 1 and 2 Corinthians to what the text says and to avoid, perhaps unwittingly, the issue of what these letters may have meant. As imperfect as our results may be, the effort must be made to discern the Corinthian mental and behavioral milieu into which Paul's correspondence was directed.

Setting the Record Straight

1 Corinthians

Putting Preachers in Their Place

(1 Corinthians 1:1–4:21)

First Corinthians 1:1–4:21 is the first large thought unit in the epistle. It consists of two of the components of the traditional Greek letter: the introduction and the body. This chapter attempts to trace the train of thought in this unit.

Introduction

(1:1-9)

The traditional introduction of a Greek letter consisted of the formula A to B, greeting, followed by a prayer form. In 1:1-9 Paul adapts this conventional opening for his own purposes: “Paul and Sosthenes [Acts 18:17] . . . to the church at Corinth. . . . grace and peace to you... I give thanks to God for you.” As in the introductions to his other letters, Paul uses the opening to introduce themes that will be crucial to his argument later. First, his apostolic ministry is mentioned as basic to all that follows (1:1, “a called one, an apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God”; cf. 1 Cor 4:4, 15-16; ch. 9; 11:1; 14:37-38; 15:9-10; 2 Cor 2:17; 5:18, 20; 11:5; 12:12). Second, the Corinthian church’s participation in the church universal is signaled as crucial (1:2, “called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord”; cf. 11:16; 14:33; 16:1, 19). Third, there is the acknowledgment of the spiritual gifts bestowed on the Corinthians at their conversion (1:4-7; cf. chs. 12–14; 2 Cor 8:7). Fourth, an eschatological reservation accompanies Paul’s talk about gifts (1:7-8, “you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ”). The End remains a future hope (cf. 1 Cor 4:8-13; ch. 15). Having introduced his letter with the conventional form, adapted as needed, the apostle is ready to move to the body of the epistle.

Body

(1:10–4:21)

Rhetorical Questions Answered (1:14–4:7)

The body of the letter begins with a request formula followed by the bases for the request (1:10-13). As in Philemon 9-10, the request formula runs: “I appeal (*parakalō*) to you” (cf. 1 Pet 5:12; Heb 13:22; Acts 15:31). The content of the request is given in a threefold refrain: “that all of you agree, that there be no dissension among you, that you be united in the same mind.” The bases for the request are two. In the first place, Chloe’s people have reported to Paul that the Corinthians are quarreling about ministers (1:11-12). They either give their spiritual guides too great a status (“I belong to Paul”; “I belong to Apollos”; “I belong to Cephas”) or no status at all (“I belong to Christ”). In the second place, the non-Christian character of this behavior reported to Paul is exposed by means of three rhetorical questions, each calling for a negative answer (v. 13):

1. Is Christ divided?
2. Was Paul crucified for you?
3. Were you baptized in the name of Paul?

The body of the letter continues with Paul’s expanded answers to the three rhetorical questions, given in reverse order.

(1:14-16) Were you baptized in the name of Paul? Rhetorical question number three is answered first. “I am thankful that I baptized only Crispus [Acts 18:8], Gaius [Rom 16:23], and the household of Stephanas [16:15], lest any should say that they were baptized in my name.”

(1:17-3:4) Was Paul crucified for you? Rhetorical question number two is answered next and at great length. This section falls into two self-contained parts: 1:17–2:5 and 2:6–3:4.

The first self-contained part is organized in a concentric pattern within an inclusion, with 1:23a, Christ crucified, as the center point.

- (a) The wise versus the foolish (1:18-20)
 - (b) Preaching saves believers (1:21)
 - (c) Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom (1:22)
 - (d) We preach Christ crucified (1:23a)
 - (c’) To Jews a stumbling block, to Greeks folly (1:23b)

- (b') Christ is power/wisdom to those called (1:24)
 (a') The wise/weak versus the foolish/strong (1:25-31)

In this self-contained unit Paul tells *what* he preached at Corinth, *how* he did it, and *why* he preached as he did. At the center of the chiasmus is *what* he preached: Christ crucified (1:23a). Judging from the context, the cross here does not refer to the death of Jesus as a sacrifice for sins (as in Rom 3:25-26), as a victory over the evil powers (as in Col 2:15), or as a revelation of God's love (as in Rom 5:8), but rather to Jesus' death to sin (as in Rom 6:10; he died rather than sin), in which believers are called to participate (e.g., Rom 6:3, 6-7, 10-11; Gal 2:20). First Cor 2:4 tells *how* this preaching was done: "my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of Spirit and power." On the one hand, the persuasiveness of Paul's preaching did not rest in his oratorical skills (cf. 2 Cor 10:10, "his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account"). Contrast Socrates' description of the spell that the funeral orator's account of Athens's great past cast upon him: "as I listen, the spell falls upon me; I feel that I have become at the moment a greater, nobler, finer man, and this feeling persists for three or four days" (Plato *Menexenus* 235 A-C). On the other hand, his preaching was confirmed by a demonstration of the Spirit and power (cf. 1 Cor 1:5-6; Gal 3:1-5; 1 Thess 1:5). Apparently, in the founding of the Pauline churches, the Spirit would fall on those who were hearing the apostle preach very much as in the description of Peter's preaching to Cornelius in Acts 10 (vv. 44, 46, "While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. . . . Then Peter declared, 'Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"). Since it was the Spirit's power rather than Paul's oratorical skill that convinced the converts, the Pauline Christians' faith would rest in the power of God instead of the wisdom of men (2:5). This is *why* he preached as he did.

The second self-contained part of 1:17–3:4 is a section in which Paul explains *what* he did *not* teach the Corinthians, *how* he teaches such things when he does, and *why* he did *not* teach such matters at Corinth. In this regard, 2:6–3:4 corresponds loosely to 1:17–2:5, functioning as a contrast to the former section.

The first item of background information for understanding the issues of 2:6–3:4 lies in the Mediterranean belief that a philosopher taught both exoteric and esoteric doctrines. Plutarch clarifies the matter when speaking about Alexander the Great's teacher, Aristotle:

It would appear... that Alexander not only received from his master his ethical and political doctrines, but also participated in those secret and more profound teachings which philosophers designate by the special terms “acroamatic” and “epoptic” and do not impart to many. (“Alexander” 7.3)

The Corinthians apparently regarded Paul’s preaching of the cross as his exoteric doctrine and wanted to know why the apostle had not taught them the esoteric matters of the faith. By not imparting this wisdom, Paul had not been a faithful or trustworthy steward of the mysteries of God (4:2). The apostle, therefore, acknowledges that he does teach a secret and hidden wisdom of God among the mature (2:6-7).

A second item of background information is relevant here. In Mediterranean antiquity there were certain categories used for a person’s progress in the moral and spiritual arena (e.g., Philo *Allegorical Interpretation* 3.159; *On Husbandry* 165). There was the beginner (*ho archomenos*); there was the one who was making progress (*ho prokoptōn*); and there was the mature or perfect person (*ho teleios*). The terminology used by the Corinthians and Paul for the first and third stages was (1) men of the flesh (*sarkinois*), babes in Christ (*nēpios en Christō*), natural man (*psychikos anthrōpos*); and (3) the mature (*teleios*), the spiritual man (*ho pneumatikos*). Paul’s practice is to teach this wisdom only to those in stage three, to the mature or the spiritual.

Is it possible to discern of what this wisdom consists? Verse 12b offers the clue: “that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.” The secret wisdom that Paul did not teach the Corinthians dealt with the gifts of the Spirit. When he does impart this wisdom, *how* does he do it? “We impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit” (2:13). *Why* did Paul not teach this to the Corinthians? “I . . . could not address you as spiritual men, but as men of the flesh, as babes in Christ” (3:1). “For when one says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ and another, ‘I belong to Apollos,’ are you not merely men?” (3:4). The presupposition underlying Paul’s argument is the common Greco-Roman epistemological conviction: like is known by like (Plato *Protagoras* 337C-338A; *Timaieus* 45C; Philo *On the Change of Names* 6; Plotinus *Enneads* 4.5.7, 23-62; 1.6.9, 30-45). Since the Corinthians who acted as if they had not died to sin were not spiritual, Paul could not teach them matters that are only spiritually discerned.

Before he could make such a judgment about these Corinthians, Paul had to confront a claim of theirs. They said, “The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself judged by no one” (2:15), and quoted Isa 40:13 in

support of their contention: “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” (Thiselton, 1978, 510-26). That this is a Corinthian assertion is supported by the fact that they try to judge Paul in 4:3-5; by the behavior in 1 Cor 5, where one is living in incest, judging all things for himself, and the community is proud of his freedom and refuses to judge him; by the behavior in 1 Cor 6:1-11, where the Christians refuse to judge one another; and by the claims of 6:12-20, “all things are lawful for me” and “every sin which a man commits is outside the body.” In response to their proof text, Paul says, “We, however, *have* the mind of Christ” (2:16). And as one with the mind of Christ, the apostle pronounces those who are quarreling over the status of various ministers “men of the flesh” and “babes in Christ.” To such the wisdom fit for the mature could not be given. They needed and need what Paul did preach, “Christ crucified”; that is, as he died to sin, so must we (Gal 2:20). Until one has died with Christ to sin, there is no possibility for his or her properly understanding the gifts. The gifts will rather be understood from the point of view of the sinful self that seeks only self-gratification and status. That is why Paul taught as he did.

(3:5–4:7) Is Christ divided? Rhetorical question number one is answered last but at length. This section also falls into two parts, 3:5-23 and 4:1-7, each dealing with the role of Christian missionaries.

The first part of the answer, 3:5-23, to rhetorical question one argues that missionaries are but servants (*diakonoi*) with differing tasks assigned them by the Lord. This point is illustrated by two paragraphs, each with a different image of the church. In the first (3:6-9b), the church is spoken of in terms of the image of a field or garden. Paul planted; Apollos watered; God gave the increase. Paul and Apollos are equal, and each will have his reward. In the second paragraph (3:9c-15), the church is referred to in terms of the image of a building or house. Paul laid the foundation (only Jesus Christ); another builds on it; God will judge every man’s products. If one’s work is built on the foundation (Jesus), it survives the Last Judgment, and one will have a reward (cf. Testament of Abraham 13).

Whatever the tasks assigned various ministers, they are intended for the well-being of the church, not its destruction. This point is made in a third paragraph (3:16-17), where the church is conceived under the image of a temple: “Do you all not know that you are God’s temple [*naos*] and that God’s Spirit dwells in you” (3:16)? Here, as in 6:19 and 2 Cor 6:16, Paul uses for temple the term *naos*, not *hieron*. Whereas the LXX uses *hieron* to refer to the Jerusalem temple generally, it uses *naos* for the most sacred parts of the temple, either the holy place (1 Kgs 6:17; 2 Chr 4:22; Ezek 8:16), or

the porch or vestibule (1 Chr 28:11; 2 Chr 8:12), or the holy of holies (Ps 28:2). Paul's usage reflects that of his Bible. He regards the church as the most sacred portions of the temple, within which God's Spirit dwells. In antiquity, in order to protect temples that were repositories of great wealth from plunderers of various sorts, two stratagems were used. On the one hand, temple police functioned as a small mercenary army to protect the temple precincts. On the other hand, a curse of the deity was leveled against anyone who violated the sanctuary (e.g., Polybius 31.9.3; Diodorus Siculus 14.63, 70; 22.5; 28.3; 31.189; Livy 29.18; Josephus, *Antiquities* 9.223-26). It was not uncommon to hear stories of the tragic end of those upon whom such a curse came. Against this background, Paul could issue the warning associated with the Christian temple: "If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him" (3:17a). Ministers are but equal servants of God, each with his own assigned task to build up the church whose unity and well-being are protected by the deity. Therefore, the implication is drawn: "So let no one boast of men" (3:21a).

In the second part of the section, 3:5-4:7, again the Pauline contention is that missionaries are servants (*hypēretas*) of Christ and stewards (*oikonomos*) of the mysteries of God (4:1). In v. 2 there is another Corinthian assertion: "Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy" (perhaps echoing the Jesus tradition now found in Luke 16:1-13). That this is the position of at least some of the Corinthians seems established by the fact that in 2:6-3:4 Paul defends himself against the Corinthian charge that he did not teach the church the wisdom (about the gifts) that they had to receive later from other ministers. From the point of view of these Corinthians, Paul had not been a faithful steward of the mysteries of God. Furthermore, as spiritual men who now possessed knowledge of these mysteries, they judged Paul unworthy. To the Corinthian assertion of v. 2, the apostle responds in vv. 3-5. It is not your place to judge me, a servant of Christ and a called apostle; that task belongs to the Lord (4:4; cf. 3:13) and will take place on the Day of Judgment (4:5; cf. 3:14-15). In 4:6-7 we have both the conclusion to this second part, 4:1-7, and the conclusion to 3:5-4:7 as a whole. When Paul says, "I have applied all this to myself and Apollos for your benefit" (4:6), he refers back to 3:5: "What then is Apollos? What is Paul?" In both instances he employs the rhetorical device "covert allusion." He is not implying that he and Apollos or he and Peter are at odds. He refers thereby, in an indirect manner, to those who are actually competing in the Corinthians congregation (Fiore, 1985). When he says that this use of himself and Apollos is aimed at their learning to live "not beyond what has been written" (4:6), the reference is probably to the instruction

given young children about how to write. Teachers sometimes used outlines of letters for pupils to follow. The point of the model was that one should follow it, making the letter neither too small nor too large. One was neither to fall short of the model nor to exceed it (Plato *Protagoras* 326D; Seneca *Epistle* 94.51; Tyler, 1998). The apostle is saying of himself and Apollos, Copy us, like a small child making his letters, and learn how not to write over the lines. Such a practice would result in their not being puffed up in favor of one minister against another (4:6b), so that divisions in the church would not occur.

Conclusion (4:8-21)

Having answered the three rhetorical questions with which he began (1:13), Paul now comes to the conclusion of the entire section (4:8-21). The conclusion consists of three components:

- a contrast (vv. 8-13)
- an exhortation (vv. 14-17)
- a warning (vv. 18-21)

(4:8-13) A Contrast. In 4:8-13 we find a contrast being drawn between the Corinthian stance (“Already you are filled! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings!”) and that of the apostles (“We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless”; cf. 2 Cor 11:21-29; 4:7-12; 6:4-10; Rom 8:35-39). The Corinthian posture is what has been called an overrealized eschatology. These Christians live as though they were already in the New Age beyond the resurrection—beyond suffering, beyond tragedy, beyond poverty, beyond hard times (cf. 15:12, 19; 2 Tim 2:18). From this posture they, like kings, were judges of all things and judged by no one (2:15). It is this overrealized eschatology that forms the root problem underlying many of the issues in the remainder of the letter. By contrast to the Corinthian triumphalism, the apostles clearly live within the limits of the present evil age. Verses 9-13 present the suffering apostle as a praiseworthy paradigm to be emulated by the Corinthians (cf. Epictetus 3.24.113-114).

(4:14-17) An Exhortation. There follows an exhortation to the Corinthians to be like the apostle, their spiritual father (4:14-17). In the rabbinic tradition, if someone teaches the son of another the Torah, it is as if he had

begotten him (b Sanhedrin 19b). Since Paul is their spiritual father, he can urge them, “be imitators of me” (cf. 7:7a; 11:1). It was to this end that Paul sent Timothy to Corinth to remind these problem children of “my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church” (4:17; cf. 1:2; 11:16; 14:33).

(4:18-21) A Warning. A warning about the consequences of failure to heed Paul’s admonitions concludes the argument (4:18-21). Some are puffed up. But if the Lord wills, Paul will come to Corinth and confront these folks with the power of God. What shall it be? “Shall I come to you with a rod or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (4:21b) These were strong words that would later be used against the apostle (e.g., 2 Cor 10:10).

Having traced the train of thought in 1 Cor 1:1–4:21, it is now necessary to attempt to summarize the positions of both the Corinthians and Paul insofar as the situation can be reconstructed (Dahl, 1977b, 40-61). In 1 Corinthians Paul answers an official letter from the church at Corinth with its six questions (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12) brought to him by Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16:17). Before he could answer their questions, however, he had to come to terms with other information that had reached him unofficially through Chloe’s people (1:11). They had told the apostle of divisions within the church caused by boastful attachments to various ministers (1:12; 3:21; 4:6). Some Christians at Corinth even resisted the idea of asking Paul for instructions, pointing both to his inadequacy (he did not teach us secret wisdom and is, therefore, an unfaithful steward of God’s mysteries, 2:6; 3:1-4; 4:2) and their own independence (2:15-16a; 4:15, 19-20) based on their overrealized eschatology (4:8-13). Given this informal information, Paul begins his letter with an appeal for unity in the church that of necessity had to involve both a reassertion of his personal authority and the theological foundation for his argument to follow.

Paul’s personal defense includes the following points:

- I have been called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus (1:1).
- The confirmation of my preaching lies not in my rhetorical skill but in the power of God that was manifested among you (1:6; 2:1, 4-5).
- My failure to teach you secret wisdom (i.e., about spiritual gifts, 2:12) was not due to my unfaithfulness as a steward of God’s mysteries (4:1-3) but to your immaturity (3:1-4).

- All ministers are to be regarded as equal (3:8), although each has a different task assigned by the Lord (3:5-15). So it is improper to be puffed up in favor of one over another (4:6b). Christ is our judge (4:4).
- However, as the one who founded the church in Corinth, I am your spiritual parent (4:15) and you should pattern your life after me (4:16).
- As an agent of the kingdom of God, I operate with God's power, not with empty words. Anyone who challenges my authority will have to stand up to this divine power when I come to Corinth.

Paul's theological foundation for much that will follow is his eschatological reservation. In 1:4-9, when he gives thanks for the gifts manifested in the Corinthian church, Paul will not allow the gifts to be the sign of the End. He speaks of waiting "for the revealing of our Lord" (1:7), who "will sustain you to the End, . . . the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:8). In 4:8-13 when he speaks of the Corinthians' overrealized eschatology, Paul holds up apostolic example for a lifestyle that is far from triumphalist: "to the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless" (4:11). This eschatological reservation (cf. Rom 6:3-5) forms the theological underpinning of much that follows. There is a "not-yet" that must be taken into account along with the "now" of Corinthian enthusiasm.

First Cor 1:1–4:21 has a preparatory function. It both establishes Paul's authority, calling on the Corinthians to emulate him, and lays a foundation for the content of the answers to be given to many of the issues raised in the letter from the church. With this behind him, the apostle can move to the paraenetic section of the letter (chs. 5–16).