

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35252-9 - The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians

Victor Paul Furnish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Paul's theological reflection in 1 Corinthians, as in his other letters, stands in the service of his apostolic ministry. It is therefore important to begin with a brief review of the origins and course of the apostle's Corinthian ministry, to take special note of what occasioned his writing of 1 Corinthians, and to offer some preliminary observations about the contents of this letter and certain of its formal characteristics.

PAUL AND THE CORINTHIANS

More is known about the Corinthian church, including Paul's relationships with it, than about any other first-century congregation. This is due not only to the extent but also to the character of 1 and 2 Corinthians, our primary sources of information. In these letters, more than in others, Paul is dealing with topics that are specific to the Corinthians' situation and to his own standing as their apostle. Even so, we must remember that Paul himself may not have been well informed about some aspects of the Corinthian situation, that in any case we are privy only to his point of view, and that any historical reconstruction like the one attempted here necessarily remains both incomplete and hypothetical.

The apostle's first visit

Ancient Corinth was strategically located somewhat south and west of the narrow isthmus of land that connects the northern part of Greece with the Peloponnesus. The city was served by two ports, Cenchreae on the Saronic Gulf to the southeast and Lechaemum on

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35252-9 - The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians

Victor Paul Furnish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the Gulf of Corinth to the northwest. Ships were regularly unloaded in one port and their cargoes transported across the isthmus for reloading at the other port, thus providing a link between shipping in the Aegean and the Adriatic. By reason of its proximity to this vital link between east and west, and because it also commanded the overland routes running north and south, Corinth was an important commercial center.

The old Greek city of Corinth had been virtually destroyed by the Romans in 146 BCE, but in 44 BCE Julius Caesar provided for the resettlement of the site as a Roman colony. By Paul's day Corinth was once more a flourishing urban center, its population likely numbering in the tens of thousands. This was an ethnically, culturally, and religiously very diverse population, in part because the original colonists had been mainly freed slaves recruited from the ranks of Rome's poor. Thus many of them would have been Syrians, Egyptians, and Jews. There were, in addition, Greeks native to the area, and then in subsequent years people from all parts of the Mediterranean world, attracted to the city in hope of increasing their fortune and their status.

Corinth was not only important as a center of trade and commerce, but in Paul's day it served also as the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. It was therefore the place of residence of the Roman proconsul, appointed annually. Moreover, the Corinth that Paul knew had regained its role as administrator of the famed Isthmian Games, held every two years at a site on the isthmus just a few miles from the center of the city. These athletic and cultural events, dedicated to the sea-god, Poseidon (known to the Romans as Neptune), added to the already large numbers of visitors coming to Corinth by reason of its commercial and political importance.

Some commentaries on the Corinthian letters continue to describe Roman Corinth as a center of unspeakable sexual debauchery. There is no evidence, however, that this was the case. Indeed, what most controlled the city's life and defined its moral character was not sexual decadence, but a relentless competition for social status, honor, wealth, and power. In this respect it was not unlike other urban centers of the day, where people with means could hope to gain higher social standing and greater honor by contributing to the public welfare, and by becoming the patrons of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35252-9 - The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians

Victor Paul Furnish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

those who needed their support and would lionize them for it. It was to such a city that Paul came preaching the gospel of Christ.¹

The earliest surviving letter written by Paul, 1 Thessalonians, was very likely dispatched sometime during his first period of residency in Corinth. From this letter one learns something about the apostle's itinerary, beginning with his mission to the Macedonian city of Philippi. He tells the Thessalonians that even though his missionary team "had . . . suffered and been terribly mistreated" in Philippi, they had gone on to Thessalonica still preaching the gospel (1 Thess. 2.1–2). After some time in that city (during which the Philippians sent them aid "more than once," Phil. 4.16), Paul and his associates proceeded to Athens, in Achaia; but, perhaps fairly soon, Timothy was sent back to Thessalonica in order to check on the situation there (1 Thess. 3.1–5).

First Thessalonians was written after Timothy's return from Macedonia (3.6), and when Silvanus, too, was with Paul (1.1). The apostle refers to Athens as if he is no longer there (3.1), so he and his two companions are probably now in Corinth. This would correspond with 2 Corinthians 1.19, where Paul names both Silvanus and Timothy as having participated in the mission to Corinth. It also agrees with the itinerary presented in Acts, where Paul's European mission proceeds from Philippi (16.11–40) to Thessalonica (17.1–9), then subsequently to Beroea (17.10–14), to Athens (17.15–34), and finally to Corinth (18.1). In Corinth the apostle is joined by Silas (Silvanus) and Timothy (18.5).

What was the gospel that Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy brought to Corinth? What were the themes of their missionary preaching in this sprawling urban center? When the apostle himself ventures to characterize the gospel that he had proclaimed there, he does so with reference to Jesus. Jesus had been presented to the Corinthians as the "crucified" one (1 Cor. 2.2), as "the Son of God" (2 Cor. 1.19), and as "Lord" (2 Cor. 4.5). It corresponds to this that

¹ More detailed comments about Roman Corinth are offered by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*, GNS 6 (Collegetown, MN, [1990? © 1983]), and V. P. Furnish, *II Corinthians*, AB 32A (Garden City, NY, 1984), 4–22. See also: John K. Chow, *Patronage and Power: A Study of Social Networks in Corinth*, JSNTSup 75 (Sheffield, 1992); and Andrew D. Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1–6*, AGJU 18 (Leiden, New York, and Cologne, 1993).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35252-9 - The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians

Victor Paul Furnish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Paul can accuse others of having preached “another Jesus” in Corinth (2 Cor. 11.4). He also refers to certain traditions that he had handed on to the Corinthians, especially those about the saving significance of Jesus’ death (1 Cor. 15.3; see also 11.23–26; 8.11) and Jesus’ resurrection and resurrection appearances (1 Cor. 15.4–8, 12, 15). Further, what can be inferred from 1 Thessalonians 1.9–10 about Paul’s missionary preaching in Thessalonica perhaps holds good for his message in Corinth as well (especially if 1 Thessalonians was written during Paul’s initial visit to Corinth): there is one true and living God; Jesus is God’s Son, resurrected from the dead; and Jesus will return to bring salvation from the coming wrath.

Paul must have remained in Corinth for a substantial period of time. The eighteen months mentioned in Acts 18.11 is not unreasonable, since 1 Corinthians attests that the congregation was relatively large and well established by the end of his first visit (see also Acts 18.10). In addition, he was there long enough to have experienced difficulties in supporting himself. Even though constantly plying his trade as a tentmaker (Acts 18.3), he was forced to depend to some extent on help from congregations that he had founded earlier (2 Cor. 11.9). Paul’s departure from Corinth seems to have been hastened by serious opposition, perhaps emanating from the city’s Jewish community (Acts 18.6–11). This had apparently culminated in some kind of a hearing before the Roman proconsul, Gallio (Acts 18.12–17). If Gallio’s term of office began in July of 51, as seems likely, and if in fact Paul had been in Corinth for something like eighteen months, then this first visit probably began in late 49 or early 50, and continued on into the summer of 51.²

The converts

The apostle’s extended residency in Corinth allowed him the opportunity not only to preach the gospel but also to organize his converts into a congregation. His preaching must have included a call to undergo baptism into Christ, and thus into the Christian community (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 12.13), even though he downplays the

² For this dating see, especially, Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Corinth*, 137–60.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35252-9 - The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians

Victor Paul Furnish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

number of persons whom he himself had baptized (1 Cor. 1.14–17). Most of all, Paul keeps reminding the Corinthians that *his* gospel is the one to which they were converted: he is their parent in the faith (1 Cor. 3.1–2; 4.15; 2 Cor. 12.14–15), the one who “planted” the gospel among them (1 Cor. 3.6), the one who laid the “foundation” for their faith by proclaiming Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3.10–11). He thus distinguishes himself from other preachers, most especially from Apollos, a Jewish Christian of Alexandrian origin who came to Corinth only later to “water” the congregation that Paul had already planted (1 Cor. 3.6; cf. Acts 18.24–19.1).

A number of the people who were converted during the apostle’s first visit to Corinth are known to us by name. Stephanas and his household are identified as the very first to accept the gospel and are warmly commended for their service to the church (1 Cor. 16.15–16). They were among those Paul acknowledges having baptized (1 Cor. 1.16), as were Gaius and Crispus (1 Cor. 1.14). Gaius is also mentioned in Romans 16.23 as the host of a house church. Both he and Stephanas were Gentile converts, while Crispus, assuming he is the same one named in Acts 18.8, was Jewish – indeed, the former head of the local synagogue.³ Two other Gentile converts were Fortunatus and Achaicus. Along with Stephanas, they happen to be with Paul as he writes 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 16.17–18). The apostle also mentions “Chloe’s people” as having come from Corinth (1 Cor. 1.11), which was more likely their home base than Ephesus. They were probably slaves, or at least in the employ of Chloe, who must have been a woman of some standing in the city. However, there is no way to determine whether she too was a member of the Corinthian congregation.

According to Acts, Paul’s first hosts in Corinth were a Jewish-Christian couple, Aquila and Priscilla (Prisca), who themselves had recently arrived in the city from Rome (Acts 18.1–4). It is unclear whether they were already Christians when they came to Corinth or were converted only after meeting Paul there. The apostle apparently became acquainted with them in the process of establishing

³ Another synagogue official, Sosthenes, is mentioned in Acts 18.17. He was perhaps Gaius’ successor. If perchance he is the same Sosthenes who joins Paul in sending 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 1.1), then he too can be listed as one of the apostle’s early converts in the city; but the identification is by no means certain.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35252-9 - The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians

Victor Paul Furnish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

himself as a tradesman in Corinth, for they too were tentmakers. However, their subsequent partnership with Paul in the service of the gospel (Rom. 16.3), along with their hosting a house church (Rom. 16.5; 1 Cor. 16.19), became much more important for him than their partnership with him in business. In addition, somewhere along the line – under what circumstances we do not know – they put their own safety at risk in order to save the apostle’s life (Rom. 16.4).

Another of Paul’s early converts in Corinth was a certain Titius Justus. The author of Acts describes him as having been “a worshiper of God” (18.7, NRSV), meaning that he was a Gentile who had associated himself with the monotheistic beliefs of the Jews, but without having become a Jew himself. Persons of this sort, in Corinth and elsewhere, were especially good prospects for conversion to Christianity.

The roster of early Corinthian converts could perhaps be extended to include at least some of those from whom Paul conveys greetings in Romans 16, a chapter that was almost certainly written in Corinth during the apostle’s third visit to his congregation. But except for Gaius (Rom. 16.23), who is known also from 1 Corinthians 1.14, one cannot be certain that any of these people had been associated with the congregation before the conclusion of Paul’s first visit.⁴

Paul’s own comment about his Corinthian converts is that “not many” had been “wise by human standards,” or “powerful,” or “of noble birth” (1 Cor. 1.26, NRSV). This tells us, on the one hand, that the larger number of them were of lower status, both socially and economically. But it also tells us that some *were* persons of considerable standing in the eyes of the world. It is probable that the Corinthians whom Paul actually names were among these “not many” of somewhat higher social standing. From what is said about them, they seem to have been well enough off financially to assume positions of civic leadership, to own slaves, to travel, and to

⁴ In addition to Gaius, four of the people named in Romans 16 seem to have been, by the time of the writing of Romans, members of the Corinthian congregation: Phoebe, a leader of the church in the town of Cenchræa, Corinth’s eastern port (16.1); Tertius, who identifies himself as the scribe of the letter (16.22); Erastus, who is described as a city official (16.23); Quartus, who bears a name that was common among slaves and freedmen (16.23).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35252-9 - The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians

Victor Paul Furnish

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Paul and the Corinthians*

7

sponsor house churches.⁵ In sum, the Corinthian Christians seem to have been a very diverse lot, ranging from the very poor to those of at least moderate wealth, and including persons of differing social status as well as of various ethnic, religious, and geographical backgrounds.

This diversity doubtless intensified the competition for status which, reflecting Corinthian society at large, seems from the very first to have strained relationships among the members of the congregation.⁶ Moreover, in this setting the apostle's own status quickly became an issue. The status-conscious Corinthians were especially offended by his effort, only partly successful, to support himself by continuing at his trade (1 Cor. 4.11–12; 9.6; Acts 18.1–4). In his day it was more socially acceptable for a teacher to earn a living by charging fees, by dependency on some wealthy patron, or even by begging.⁷ Paul, however, refused to accept financial support from the Corinthians, even though he claimed the right to it (1 Cor. 9.3–18), and even though he did accept help from the Macedonians (2 Cor. 11.8–9). He was thus perceived as demeaning both himself and the congregation (2 Cor. 11.7, 10–11; 12.13–15). Later, when he was trying to get the Corinthians to contribute to a relief fund for the church in Jerusalem, he was even suspected of raising money under false pretenses (2 Cor. 12.16–18).

Paul's letters to the church

It is certain that Paul wrote at least three letters to his Corinthian congregation. In addition to the two that have been handed down as 1 and 2 Corinthians there is the one that he himself mentions in 1 Corinthians 5.9: "I wrote to you in the letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons." This matter-of-fact reference to "the

⁵ For important discussions of the social and economic status of Paul's converts, especially in Corinth, see Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia, 1982), 69–119; Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (2nd edn.; Philadelphia, 1983), 71–91; Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT, 1983), 51–73; and Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth*.

⁶ See especially, Theissen, *Social Setting*, 121–74, and Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth*, 59–107.

⁷ See Ronald Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia, 1980), 52–59.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35252-9 - The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians

Victor Paul Furnish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

letter” makes it likely that it was the only one he had sent to Corinth prior to 1 Corinthians. Paul has mentioned it only because he wants to clarify the one particular directive it contained about sexually immoral people; he meant those *within* the church, he says, not those outside (1 Cor. 5.10–11). In order to avoid confusion, the letter described in 1 Corinthians 5.9 may be designated as *Letter A*, and 1 Corinthians itself as *Letter B*.

Some scholars believe that a fragment of Letter A survives in 2 Corinthians 6.14–7.1,⁸ yet the evidence for this is meager and the arguments advanced to support it are fragile.⁹ It is best to consider this earliest of Paul’s Corinthian letters as lost. Because so little is known about its contents, nothing can be said about its overall purpose, where it was written, or its specific date. We know only that Paul must have sent it sometime between his departure from Corinth in 51 (perhaps mid-summer) and his writing of 1 Corinthians (probably in 54 or 55; see below).

In 2 Corinthians, as well as in 1 Corinthians, Paul refers to a letter that he has previously sent to the congregation. He describes this one as having been written “out of an exceedingly troubled, anguished heart” and with “many tears” (2.4). Its purpose had been to enlist the congregation’s support in bringing closure to the case of one of their number who had in some respect wronged Paul, and thus the congregation as a whole (2.3, 5–11; 7.8, 12). The long-held view that the letter in question is 1 Corinthians no longer has many defenders.¹⁰ A more widely accepted hypothesis is that this “tearful” (or “severe”) letter was written after a second, “painful visit” to Corinth (see 2 Cor. 2.1), and therefore after 1 Corinthians. A number of scholars have argued that this letter (which we may designate as *Letter C*) consisted, at least in part, of what eventually became chapters 10–13 of 2 Corinthians.¹¹ But

⁸ E.g., John Coolidge Hurd, Jr., *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* (London, 1965), 235–39.

⁹ Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 379–80.

¹⁰ One of the few is Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, 1962), 63–65.

¹¹ Among the proponents of this view: James Houghton Kennedy, *The Second and Third Epistles of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (London, 1900), 79–94; Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC (Edinburgh, 1915), xxvii–xxxvi; Günther Bornkamm, “Die Vorgeschichte des sogenannten Zweiten Korintherbriefes,” *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, IV, BEvT 53 (Munich, 1971), 172–75; Francis Watson, “2 Cor. x–xiii and Paul’s Painful Letter to the Corinthians,” *JTS* 35 (1984), 324–46.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35252-9 - The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians

Victor Paul Furnish

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Paul and the Corinthians*

9

another common view is that Letter C, like Letter A, did not survive.¹²

How many other letters Paul may have written to Corinth depends, in part, on whether one holds that 2 Corinthians is a single letter or a composite of two or more originally separate letters. While there are a few scholars who defend the literary integrity of 2 Corinthians,¹³ the majority regard at least chapters 10–13 as a separate letter;¹⁴ and there are a number who argue that three (or four) distinct letters can be identified just within chapters 1–9.¹⁵ But however many letters were eventually combined to form 2 Corinthians as it now stands, probably all of them had been written after 1 Corinthians. They therefore reflect developments in Paul's dealings with the church that are subsequent to the letter with which we are here primarily concerned.¹⁶

Corinthian Christianity

Even though Paul was the first to preach the gospel in Corinth, once a congregation had been founded there it seems to have taken

¹² In addition to Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 159–60, see, especially, Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, WBC 40 (Waco, TX, 1986), xlvii–l, and Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, ICC (Edinburgh, 1994), I.57–61.

¹³ E.g., Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (3rd edn.; London, 1970), 430–39, 449; Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle*, xxi–xxxv; Niels Hyldahl, "Die Frage nach der literarischen Einheit des Zweiten Korintherbriefes," *ZNW* 64 (1973), 289–306; Christian Wolff, *Der zweite Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, THKNT 8 (Berlin, 1970), 1–3.

¹⁴ E.g., Hans Windisch, *Der zweite Korintherbrief*, KEK (9th edn.; Göttingen, 1924 [repr. edited by Georg Strecker, 1970]), 11–21; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, BNTC (London, 1973), 11–21; Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 35–48; Martin, *2 Corinthians*, xxxviii–lii; Thrall, *Second Epistle*, 5–20.

¹⁵ E.g., Bornkamm, "Vorgeschichte," 186–87; Hans-Martin Schenke and Karl Martin Fischer, *Einleitung in die Schriften des Neuen Testaments. I: Die Briefe des Paulus und Schriften des Paulinismus* (Gütersloh, 1978), 109–12; Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament, II: History and Literature of Early Christianity*, Hermeneia: Foundations and Facets (Philadelphia, 1982), 127–30, 136–37; Hans Dieter Betz, *2 Corinthians 8 and 9. A Commentary on Two Administrative Letters of the Apostle Paul*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia, 1985), 142–43.

¹⁶ In my view (*II Corinthians*, 35–48), chs. 1–9 (or at least chs. 1–8) are to be identified as *Letter D* (written from Macedonia, perhaps in the fall of 55), and chs. 10–13 with *Letter E* (also from Macedonia, perhaps in the spring or summer of 56); cf. the scholars named in n. 14, above; also Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians*, *New Testament Theology* (Cambridge, 1991), 16–17. All of the scholars named in n. 15 identify at least three letters in 2 Corinthians, in the following sequence: (1) 2.14–6.13 + 7.2–4; (2) chs. 10–13; (3) 1.1–2.13 + 7.5–16 (+ 13.11–13); but these scholars differ in their judgments about chs. 8 and 9.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35252-9 - The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians

Victor Paul Furnish

Excerpt

[More information](#)

on a life of its own. To be sure, its founding apostle continued to exercise significant pastoral direction by means of the letters he wrote, the representatives he sent, and his own subsequent visits. But other forces were also at work shaping Corinthian Christianity. From several remarks by Paul himself we know that Apollos must have been teaching in Corinth within the first few years of the congregation's founding (1 Cor. 3.6; 16.12), and that he had made a lasting impression on the congregation (1 Cor. 1.12; 3.4–5, 22; 4.6). Cephas, too, seems to have had a following there (1 Cor. 1.12; 3.22), although nothing Paul says suggests that Cephas himself had ever been in Corinth. It is possible, however, that others from the Jerusalem church had ministered there as his representatives (see 9.5; 15.5).

In addition to the influences exerted by various itinerating ministers of the gospel, Corinthian Christianity was quite evidently shaped by the diverse cultural, social, religious, and political currents and institutions that made up its urban environment. To be sure, Paul expresses confidence that his converts had abandoned certain of their former practices (1 Cor. 6.9–11), and it is clear that they would have experienced at least the disruption, and often the total alteration, of their relationships to family, friends, and society at large. Yet the apostle also recognizes that believers cannot separate themselves entirely from society (e.g., 1 Cor. 5.9–10; 7.12–13), and that conversion marks only the beginning of their acculturation to the gospel (1 Cor. 3.1–3). As a consequence, Paul's task was not only to help his congregation define itself in relation to "the world" outside. His equally urgent and perhaps more difficult task was to help it reckon with that world as it continued to be present in the lives of believers, and therefore within the church itself. Especially in the ways they related to one another and to their leaders (including Paul), and in certain of their congregational structures and practices, the Corinthian Christians continued to be influenced by the social patterns and conventions of Roman Corinth.¹⁷

Because our only source for the theological views prevailing in the congregation is the apostle himself, all characterizations of

¹⁷ For particulars: Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth*; Chow, *Patronage and Power*.