

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-35898-9 - The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians
Jerome Murphy-O'Connor
Excerpt
[More information](#)

PART I

Introduction

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35898-9 - The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Life in Corinth

The similarity between Paul's letters is less marked than their differences. One can sense in each the presence of the same basic theological approach, but the aspects that he highlights vary from epistle to epistle. The reason for this is that Paul never wrote just for the sake of communicating ideas. In fact, with the exception of Romans, he never wrote except when the need was forced upon him by information from one of the churches he had founded. Each letter, therefore, is a response, part of a dialogue whose agenda was established by his interlocutors, and he emphasizes what his readers needed to hear at a particular moment in their history. This dialogical element is more marked in the Corinthian correspondence than in other letters. But we only hear Paul's voice; what he says becomes really intelligible only to the extent that we can reconstruct the theological positions and social attitudes of his readers.

THE CITY OF CORINTH¹

The Christian community at Corinth was but another touch of colour in the variegated mosaic of a great city. Its members were not foreigners but residents. They came from the city and were conditioned by its tone and temper, by its history and

¹ The textual and archaeological material on which this description is based is conveniently assembled in my *St. Paul's Corinth* (Wilmington, 1983). See also my 'The Corinth that St. Paul Saw', *BA* 47 (1984), 147–59; and V. P. Furnish, 'Corinth in Paul's Time – What Can Archaeology Tell Us?', *BAR* 15, 3 (May–June 1988), 14–27.

institutions. The problems which developed in the Corinthian community were very different from those which beset the Galatians, because their backgrounds were so diverse. Celtic tribes living on the vast prairies of central Anatolia had little in common with the inhabitants of a great commercial centre situated at a major crossroads of the ancient world.

Inside its 10 km city wall anchored by the height of Acrocorinth, Corinth sat virtually astride the 6 km-wide isthmus linking the Peloponnese to mainland Greece. This gave it control over north–south trade. It had two harbours, Lechaëum on the Corinthian Gulf and Cenchreae on the Saronic Gulf. These acted as the main channel for east–west trade because sea travel around the southern tip of the Peloponnese was so dangerous that it had given rise to the proverb ‘When you double Cape Maleae forget your home’ (Strabo, *Geography* 8: 6.20). The coffers of Corinth were always full, and from the time of Homer (*Iliad* 2:570) the adjective associated with Corinth was ‘wealthy’.

The prime economic position of Corinth led to its refounding by Julius Caesar in 44 BC as *Colonia Laus Julia Corinthiensis*, just a century after its destruction by Rome because of its involvement in the Achaean League. Caesar gave it an administrative structure parallel to that of republican Rome. Four magistrates were elected each year who became eligible for membership of the city council after going out of office. When Achaia became a senatorial province in 27 BC it was governed by a proconsul who resided in Corinth. Appointed by the Roman Senate, each proconsul served for a year, and Paul’s founding visit to Corinth is dated by his encounter with the proconsul Lucius Iunius Gallio (AD 51–2). Latin remained the official language of the city until the early second century AD, but for the majority Greek was the language of business and social life.

The new settlers were for the most part freedmen, former slaves hailing originally from Greece, Syria, Judea and Egypt. They had to start by robbing graves, but their enterprise and industry quickly led to the re-establishment of industry and trade. Once the colony was seen to be securely based, it attracted entrepreneurs from the major trading countries of the

Life in Corinth

5

eastern Mediterranean. Such infusions of new capital in a prime commercial situation generated more wealth. Two factors attest the increasing prosperity of Corinth: the number of monumental buildings erected in the city centre during the reigns of Augustus (31 BC–AD 14) and Tiberius (AD 14–37); and the ability of the city to host once again the Isthmian Games, which were second in importance only to the Olympic Games. The vast expenditure which the Isthmian Games involved was the responsibility of the citizen elected as president, but the financial gain consequent on the presence of huge crowds of visitors benefited even small businesses. All this development demanded banking facilities, and by the early first century AD Corinth was an important financial centre.

The religious and ethnic diversity of Corinth is graphically attested by the remains of temples and shrines: the gods and goddesses of Greece are well represented; Egyptian influence is documented by the worship of Isis and Serapis; a temple near the forum witnesses to the cult of the emperor. Nothing yet discovered betrays a Jewish presence, but Philo (*Delegation to Gaius*, 281) says that there was a large and vital Jewish community at Corinth in the first century AD.

The ethos of Corinth is best illustrated by the proverb 'Not for everyone is the voyage to Corinth' (Horace, *Letters* 1:17.36; Strabo, *Geography* 8:6.20). It meant that only the strong and ruthless could survive the intense competitiveness of a wide-open boom town. Corinth had no hereditary patrician class to give it the stately dignity that an ancient university city such as Athens enjoyed. Its prominent citizens were all *nouveaux riches*. The only Corinthian tradition which the new colony respected was commercial success. It was every man for himself and the weak went to the wall.

Wealth, however, is a fragile base for self-esteem; it can vanish as quickly as it came. Contrary to what has been widely accepted, the dominant mythical figure at Corinth was not Aphrodite but Sisyphus. Described by Homer as 'the craftiest of men' (*Iliad* 6:154), he was one of the legendary kings of Corinth. On his return to Hades, after having once tricked the lord of the underworld into letting him return to earth, he was

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35898-9 - The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

INTRODUCTION

condemned ever to roll a rock to the top of a hill. As he neared the summit it would slip from his hands and he would have to begin all over again. For the Corinthians and many others his task symbolized the futility of existence. The most that could be hoped for was the temporary success of the trickster; the future was in no way secure. It was an age of anxiety.²

Even if Paul did not know that there was an interior void to be filled, there were a number of reasons why he chose boisterous, brawling, bustling Corinth as his first main missionary base; the second was to be Ephesus, which resembled it in many respects. Corinth was open to new ideas in a way that more traditional cities were not. If Christianity could be implanted in such a hostile environment, it would be evidence of its intrinsic power to change the world. Those from afar who came to the city on business or as visitors to the Isthmian Games might become converts who would bring the faith back to their own people. This intense traffic assured him of excellent communications. In the travelling season there were always ships going east and west as well as traders going north and south with whom he could send his messages.

THE CHURCH AT CORINTH

According to Acts 18:11, Paul's founding visit to Corinth lasted eighteen months. His encounter with the proconsul Gallio (Acts 18:12) permits us to specify that this visit ran from the spring of AD 50 to the late summer of AD 51. We are told that he worked as a tent-maker together with Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:1-3); and in fact they would have had plenty of business. Those taking passage on a ship had to have small tents to protect them from sun and spray on board, and to shelter them when they camped at night on a lonely beach. The Isthmian Games were celebrated in the spring of AD 51 and influenced Paul's imagery in 1 Corinthians 9:24-5. The visitors from abroad were housed in tents, and the shopkeepers of

² On this little-discussed aspect of life in antiquity see especially E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety. Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge, 1965).

Life in Corinth

7

Corinth who moved out to Isthmia, to supply their needs used tents in which to display their wares. To be gainfully employed was important to Paul. At Corinth parasites got short shrift (Alciphron, *Letters of Parasites* n. 24; 3:60), and he did not want receptivity to his preaching to be conditioned by acceptance of a financial burden (1 Cor. 9:1–18).³

The names of a number of his converts can be gleaned from Acts 18:2–17, 1 Cor. 16:15–19, and Rom. 16:1–3, 21–3. There are sixteen names in all. Since some were converted with their households, and presumably all were married, the minimum membership of the community must have been between forty and fifty. It may have been considerably larger, because Paul certainly does not list even every male member.

Efforts have been made to determine the status of these individuals in order to get some idea of the social stratification of the Christian community at Corinth.⁴ Many factors contribute to fixing status, e.g. racial origins, legal status, personal status, occupation, religion, sex, wealth, etc. Some indicators carry more weight than others, depending on the social context, and in addition are conditioned by the attitude of the person judging. Many members of the Corinthian community rate high on one or more scales but low on others. Aquila, for example, rates high in terms of wealth and gender, because he was a male and travelled considerably, but low in terms of legal status, occupation and religion, because he was a Jew who worked with his hands and was only a resident alien at Corinth. Phoebe was patroness of the church at Cenchreae, which would give her a rank equal to Gaius who hosted the whole church. But he was a man and she a woman, and that made a significant difference.

This inconsistency in the way people of apparently similar station were actually judged in status and rank led to dissatisfaction with the status quo. Individuals afflicted with status

³ See, R. E. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry. Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia, 1980).

⁴ The initial attempt by G. Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity. Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia, 1982), 69–119, should be corrected in the light of W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians. The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, 1983), 51–73.

inconsistency are mobile and restless. They question and strive for change in order to resolve the ambiguities and contradictions under which they live. Certain Corinthians were attracted by the paradoxes (e.g. a crucified Saviour) with which Paul's gospel abounded, perhaps because these resonated with their perception of reality. They saw the new egalitarian community that he proposed as an alternative environment in which their energies and talents could be deployed with a freedom that society denied them. This explanation of why Paul quickly won converts at Corinth is confirmed by the absence of anyone from the very top or bottom of the Greco-Roman social scale. There were no patricians or landed aristocrats, nor were there any field or mine slaves. In other words, those who had no expectations (since they had everything) and those who had no hope (since no improvement seemed possible) were not attracted to Christianity.

Another aspect exhibited by the Corinthian community is brought to light in 1 Corinthians 1:26–8, which is as close to a social description of the membership as Paul ever gets. He contrasts a minority referred to as 'wise, powerful and well-born' with the majority who are 'stupid, weak, base and despised'. All these terms occur regularly in classical Greek literature to express the basic class distinction between 'rich' and 'poor'. Thus, for example, Aristotle says, 'inasmuch as oligarchy is defined by birth, wealth and education, the characteristics of the mass of citizens are thought to be the opposite of these, low birth, poverty and vulgarity' (*Politics*, 6:1.9 1317b39–41). It is not to be thought that this class division was completely overcome by the idealism implicit in conversion to Christ. Paul in fact has to condemn wealthy members of the community for the way they humiliate the 'have-nots' (1 Cor. 11:21–2).

This, however, was not the only consequence. With his customary insight Aristotle points out that 'Party strife is always due to inequality' (*Politics*, 5:1.6 1301b27), and Paul bemoans the jealousy and strife which have led Corinthian Christians to form party factions (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:3–4). On the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35898-9 - The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Life in Corinth*

9

basis of a pattern common in Greek cities of the period, it would appear that certain wealthy members of the community exploited the dependence of poor believers to carve out for themselves power bases within the church.⁵ This tendency was accentuated by the fact that no averagely wealthy house of the period could comfortably receive the whole community. Paul's use of the adjective 'whole' in 1 Corinthians 14:23 and Romans 16:23 suggests that such reunions were rare. The community normally met in sub-groups, a series of house churches whose relative isolation from one another encouraged divisions and differences.⁶

⁵ This suggestive insight is developed by L. L. Welborn, 'On the Discord in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Ancient Politics', *JBL* 106 (1987), 85-111.

⁶ House churches and their problems are discussed by R. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community. The Early Housechurches in their Historical Setting* (Sydney, 1979). He has also published a fascinating imaginative reconstruction, *Going to Church in the First Century. An Eyewitness Account* (Chipping Norton, NSW, 1980).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35898-9 - The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER 2

The background of 2 Corinthians

Although 2 Corinthians is separated by only a year from 1 Corinthians (2 Cor. 8:10; 9:2; cf. 1 Cor. 16:1–4) and is addressed to the same community, it is a very different document. Apart from minor outbursts, the tone of 1 Corinthians is calm and measured, and the matters discussed are clearly delineated and organized. Such cool logic is absent in 2 Corinthians. A sense of injury pervades the letter, and the tension under which Paul labours is perceptible in the associative links that give rise to digressions and repetitions, and make certain transitions difficult to explain.

THE INTEGRITY OF 2 CORINTHIANS

One very radical explanation is offered for these digressions and repetitions. Thus, for example, because 7:5ff. seems to be the natural continuation of 2:12–13, it is argued that an editor forced them apart in order to insert 2:14–7:4, which actually belonged to another letter written by Paul to Corinth. When the same type of explanation is applied to similar problems, the result is the theory that 2 Corinthians is a combination of five originally distinct letters.⁷

Like many commentators, I do not find that the hard transitions in chapters 1–9 imply such a degree of discontinuity as to demand such a radical partition theory. On the other hand, however, it is perfectly clear that chapters 10–13 cannot be the continuation of chapters 1–9. It is psychologically

⁷ For example, G. Bornkamm, 'The History of the Origin of the So-Called Second Letter to the Corinthians', *NTS* 8 (1961–2), 258–64.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35898-9 - The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The background of 2 Corinthians*

11

impossible that Paul should suddenly switch from the celebration of reconciliation with the Corinthians (1–9) to savage reproach and sarcastic self-vindication (10–13). Such an attack on the Corinthians would have undone everything he had tried to achieve in chapters 1–9.⁸

If chapters 1–9 and 10–13 are in fact two separate letters, which came first? Some scholars date chapters 10–13 before chapters 1–9, because they claim that the severe and often brutal tone indicates that it must be identified with the Sorrowful Letter, to which Paul refers in 2:4 and 7:8.⁹ Such a solution, however, is unacceptable. It is clear from 2:5–8 that the Sorrowful Letter was occasioned by the behaviour of someone who insulted Paul. Such an individual is never even alluded to in chapters 10–13, which are concerned with the damage done to the community by false apostles. The content of chapters 10–13, therefore, excludes its identification with the Sorrowful Letter, and this in turn removes the only reason for dating this letter prior to chapters 1–9.

The bitter tone of chapters 10–13 is better explained if it was written subsequently to chapters 1–9.¹⁰ Clear hints of serious tension can be detected beneath the conciliatory tone of chapters 1–9. There had been a reconciliation of sorts between Paul and the Corinthians. Even though he was not entirely convinced that the root of the trouble had been completely eradicated, he desperately wanted to believe that the Corinthians had definitely decided for him and against his opponents within the community. It is natural to wish troubles behind one, but Paul wanted to be free to move into virgin territory and found new churches. When news came that the

⁸ Recently F. Young and D. F. Ford have tried to justify the change in emotional tone in chapters 10–13 by arguing that the genre of 2 Corinthians is that of a forensic defence whose common pattern demanded a highly charged emotional peroration which is to be found in chapters 10–13 (*Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians* (London, 1987), 27–59). While the first part of this hypothesis is acceptable, the second shatters on the rock of chapters 8–9. A plea for money, even for others, has no place in an *apologia*.

⁹ For example, A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC; Edinburgh, 1915), xxvii–xxxvi.

¹⁰ So, rightly, C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNTC; London, 1973), 243–5; V. P. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (AB; Garden City, NY, 1984), 35–41.