

The First Epistle to the Corinthians

Historical Evidence

Church tradition and historical evidence point to Paul as the writer of this epistle, and this has never been seriously challenged. The epistle is addressed from Paul to the church in Corinth. -

*1:1 Paul, a called apostle of Jesus Christ, through the will of God, and Sosthenes the brother,
1:2 to the assembly of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints, with all those calling upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place -- both theirs and ours:
1:3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!*

Probably the earliest evidence of the existence of the epistle comes in Clement's 1st Epistle to the Corinthians in which he writes : *“Take the epistle of the blessed Paul the apostle; what did he write to you in the beginning of the gospel? Truly he addressed an epistle to you of a spiritual kind, concerning himself, and Cephas, and Apollos, for even then was there partisanship among you.”* Clement of Rome died during the last quarter of the 1st century; he may have been the Clement of Philippians 4:3 *“and I ask also thee, genuine yoke-fellow, be assisting those women who in the good news did strive along with me, with Clement also, and the others, my fellow-workers, whose names [are] in the book of life.”* Clement may not only have been known to Paul as a fellow-worker but also, like Paul, a Jew converted to Christianity. Lightfoot was of that opinion because of Clement's extensive use of Old Testament quotations in his writings.

There is evidence that Ignatius (c. 50 – 98), Polycarp (c. 69-155), Irenaeus (c. 120-200), Athenagoras (2nd century), Clement of Alexandria (died c. 215) and Tertullian (c 160 – 220+) all new of it and quoted from it. The epistle is also included in the Muratorian list of canonical books which dates from the 2nd century. - *“For the epistles of Paulhe wrote to not more than seven churches, in this order; first to the Corinthians, the second to the Ephesians, the third to the Philippians, the fourth to the Colossians, the fifth to the Galatians, the sixth to the Thessalonians, and seventh to the Romans”*

The City of Corinth.

Corinth was a place where east and west met, and, like adjacent tectonic plates moving in different directions, a place of cultural instability. It had been made a Roman colony¹, but in Greece, and its population had become a mixture of Hellenised Latins and Latinised Greeks, plus an admixture of numerous other cultures since Corinth was virtually a sea port. The result was a population which had no real roots and given to vices often associated with populations that cannot identify themselves, and without longstanding family connections and traditions. Immorality was institutionalized in the form of the Temple of Aphrodite Pandemos, which was said to have had around a thousand prostitutes directly associated with the temple, which, in effect, was a massive brothel, and there were also female courtesans available for 'private hire'. When one adds to these the money hungry traders, unprincipled itinerants, and the general undesirables that wealth attracts, one has the makings of a society that needs Christianity, but that is unlikely to become seriously Christian. Jews were also present in sufficient numbers to have a synagogue – Acts 18 1:8

*18:1 And after these things, Paul having departed out of Athens, came to Corinth,
18:2 and having found a certain Jew, by name Aquilas, of Pontus by birth, lately come from Italy, and Priscilla his wife -- because of Claudius having directed all the Jews to depart out of Rome² -- he came to them,*

1 Roman Colonies were populated by relocated urban poor from Rome and retired military, who given a place to live at the end of their service. This system gave Rome a cultural centre abroad and a power base overseas, it also ensured that highly trained retired soldiers were kept under control and not wandering the empire, possibly causing insurrection.

2 Circa 49.

18:3 and because of being of the same craft, he did remain with them, and was working, for they were tent-makers as to craft;

18:4 and he was reasoning in the synagogue every sabbath, persuading both Jews and Greeks.

18:5 And when both Silas and Timotheus came down from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the Spirit, testifying fully to the Jews Jesus the Christ;

18:6 and on their resisting and speaking evil, having shaken [his] garments, he said unto them, 'Your blood [is] upon your head -- I am clean; henceforth to the nations I will go on.'

18:7 And having departed thence, he went to the house of a certain one, by name Justus, a worshipper of God, whose house was adjoining the synagogue,

18:8 and Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue did believe in the Lord with all his house, and many of the Corinthians hearing were believing, and they were being baptized. (Young)

An added tension came from from the mixture of rich and poor. Most Corinthians would have been poor but some of Paul's converts were people of note – Erastus was treasurer of Corinth and Gaius was able to give hospitality to Paul. Both these names are of Latin origin as are Lucius, Tertius, Quartus, Crispus, etc, it would appear that the rich converts were of Roman origin.

The church in Corinth was drawn out of the population of the world of Corinth – the church was in the Corinthian world and its members chose to bring the Corinthian world into the church³, with disastrous result. Each grouping had its own destructive individuality and no section was able to reject its old ways and conform to the norms of Christianity.

Reasons for the Letter

The Corinthian Church had written to Paul asking for guidance, and that letter required a reply, but in addition Paul had heard of evidence of the disintegration of the Church through sectarianism and of a legion of evils and disorders having taken place. It was, therefore, necessary to write a letter of correction concerning these disorders.

1. Paul censures the Corinthian Church for having fragmented into sections. It is not surprising that a Church, populated by people of such diverse backgrounds, should become riven by partisanship – *Is Christ divided?* Such divisions had no place in the church.
2. Paul urges the correction of a person guilty of an incestuous relationship and argues against Christians taking each other to civil law.
3. Paul answers inquiries made in the letter from the Corinthians – in particular regarding marriage.
4. Paul demands that women should follow the Jewish and Roman practice of covering their heads in worship and elsewhere. It was the practice of Greek women to remain bare headed. Another cultural difference which Paul condemned was the practice of women speaking in church. Greek and Roman women were far more emancipated than Jewish women, and the former were used to being heard.
5. Paul insists that the Resurrection was central to the Christian belief.
6. Paul recommends giving money for the Church in Jerusalem. This may have caused some suspicion among the worldly wise of the Corinthians, who may have been doubtful of Paul's honesty.

Place and Date of Writing

Written in Ephesus, probably about 55.

3 From Moffatt.