

1 CORINTHIANS

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor

THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

A devotional commentary for study and preaching

PREFACE

When I wrote this commentary for the first time in 1997, I was given very strict guidelines to follow. I had to divide the letter into segments small enough to permit each one to be explained in exactly two pages, no more, no less. That much was enough for a daily reading.

At that point my knowledge of 1 Corinthians rested on the technical analyses that I had published in a series of articles between 1977 and 1993. In writing these scientific articles I had total freedom to decide how much space to give to any aspect, and my attention was concentrated on the small detail rather than the whole picture.

The need to comment on the whole of 1 Corinthians forced me to consider aspects of the text that had not particularly attracted me before, and the rigorous format obliged me to delve further beneath the surface, even in areas which I thought I had considered deeply. Inevitably I found riches that I had not anticipated, and in the most surprising places.

Over the years other scholars interacted with my scientific articles. Some found truth and inspiration. Others thought that at times I was mistaken, to say the least. Two years ago I was given the opportunity to bring these articles together and to publish them as a book. This is common for professors in retirement, but I decided to break the mould by appending a postscript to each article. I would take up the history of an idea from the time it left my pen to the present. Had anyone paid attention to my proposal? Did those who agreed find new arguments to strengthen my position? Were the arguments of those who dissented convincing? Should I revise or refine my hypothesis in the light of new data?

As one can easily imagine, it was both a humbling and an exhilarating experience. The insights that came to me in the writing of this popular commentary were filtered back into the scientific debate. In some cases they contributed to filling out a more precise picture, while in others they provided ammunition to deflate gently the contradictory ideas of others. By and large my colleagues were generous in their acceptance of my ideas, but I cannot say the last word on 1 Corinthians. In the twilight of my career I am deeply grateful to

have been part of a process that is bringing to light the healing truth of the greatest epistle in the New Testament.

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor

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PBC 1 CORINTHIANS:

INTRODUCTION

Paul had lived in busy cities. Tarsus, Jerusalem, Damascus, Antioch and Athens were important centres with cosmopolitan populations. Yet when Paul came to Schoenus, rather wearily after his long two-day walk from Athens, he must have rubbed his eyes in amazement. Schoenus was the eastern terminus of the paved road linking the Saronic Gulf and the Corinthian Gulf at the narrowest point of the isthmus by which the Peloponnese hung like a leaf from mainland Greece.

This road was the crucial transfer point for east-west trade that preferred to avoid the risk of sailing around Cape Malea, the southern tip of the Peloponnese. Ant-like lines of labourers moved backwards and forwards continuously. They hauled small ships on a special carriage whose wheels ran in grooves in the pavement. The cargoes of larger ships had to be unloaded and moved piecemeal to the other terminal. The crackling energy of the scene, the bustle and the noise was like nothing that Paul had ever experienced before. It had the impact of a blow. This was the dynamism that had won for Corinth the qualification 'wealthy' since the time of Homer. Paul would be forgiven for wondering if people so busy would ever have time to listen to the gospel.

The choice of Corinth

After being forced out of Beroea, Paul fled south to Athens (Acts 17:10–15). The once-glorious cultural centre of Greece had fallen on evil days. It was an old, sick city without vitality, turned in on itself. Tradition was venerated in order to hold the threat of novelty at bay. Very quickly Paul realized that his preaching would be just another philosophy to be debated.

Corinth, on the other side of the Saronic Gulf, was a very different city. Its location on the isthmus made it the crossroads of north-south as well as east-west trade. For this reason it was re-founded by Julius Caesar in 44BC, and quickly became the leading trading centre in the eastern Mediterranean. Within two generations it was producing millionaires. It was a city of the self-made, and lived for the future. Its people were sceptical and preoccupied, but new ideas were guaranteed a hearing, because profit was to be found in the strangest places.

Paul could see several advantages in preaching at Corinth. He would at least be assured a hearing, and to succeed in establishing a church in such a materialistic environment would be indisputable evidence of the power of the gospel. All the world knew the proverb: 'Not for everyone is the voyage to Corinth'. It was no place for the timid or the gullible. To convert hard-headed Corinthians would be a triumph of grace. Finally, the situation of Corinth guaranteed Paul superb communications. He could be virtually certain of finding someone to carry a letter anywhere.

The foundation of the church

Accompanied by Silvanus and Timothy (2 Corinthians 1:19), Paul arrived in Corinth sometime in the late spring or early summer of AD50. He found work and lodging with Prisca and Aquila, Christians who had been expelled from Rome by the emperor Claudius in AD41 (Acts 18:1–3), and with whom he shared the trade of tentmaker. While with them he wrote two letters to the Thessalonians.

Even though he operated from a small workshop, which identified him as a despised manual labourer, Paul's first converts were decidedly upper class (1 Corinthians 1:14–16). They had the leisure to assist his efforts, and owned the sort of house in which the community could assemble (Romans 16:23). He must have targeted them as a matter of policy. His success reveals the power of his personality.

For different reasons the names of members of the community are mentioned in Acts 18:1–18; 1 Corinthians 1:14–16; 16:15–17, and Romans 16:21–24. They are not complete or systematic lists. They imply a minimum of between forty and fifty Christians at Corinth. The vast majority were of pagan origin, but had some association with the Jewish synagogue.

A number suffered from 'status inconsistency'. Their stature in their own eyes was not accepted by society at large. Prisca and Aquila, for example, were successful business people, but they were Jews, outsiders who resided in the city on sufferance. Erastus (Romans 16:23) had achieved the second most important post in the administration of Corinth but believed that everyone saw him only as the son of a slave. They were attracted to the gospel because it embodied the paradox they lived. The idea of a saviour who died under torture spoke to the contradictions of their existence. Power in weakness meant something to them. Christianity offered them not only under-

standing, but a social context in which they would be accepted for what they were as persons.

In general the Corinthians who believed the gospel were representative of the different social strata in the city, with the exceptions of the very top (the great magnates) and the very bottom (the mine and field slaves). They also reflected the best side of the ethos of the dynamic city. They worked on being Christians with the same commitment and enthusiasm that they brought to the other facets of their successful lives. Unlike the Galatians who were paralysed by prudence, the Corinthians willingly accepted the responsibility of finding out for themselves what being a Christian meant in practice.

Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half. Shortly before his departure in September AD51, Jews dragged him before Lucius Iunius Gallio, the proconsul of the Roman province of Achaia, but the charges were dismissed.

Between Corinth and Ephesus

Paul sailed for Antioch from Cenchreae, the eastern port of Corinth. His first port of call was Ephesus, where he left Prisca and Aquila to prepare the ground for his return. He had decided that the capital of the Roman province of Asia would be the place best suited for him to keep in touch with the churches he had founded. It was roughly in the centre of a circle that encompassed them all.

From Antioch Paul went to Jerusalem to negotiate the question of whether converts to Christianity from paganism needed to be circumcised (Galatians 2:1–10). The decision went in his favour, but he lost the next battle, which was to preserve the tolerant unity of the church at Antioch. Paul felt that he could no longer belong to, or represent, a church that discriminated against Gentile believers, forcing them in effect to become Jews (Galatians 2:11–14).

Paul left Antioch in the spring of AD52, as soon the snow in the passes to the high country had melted, and reached Ephesus by the end of that summer. Shortly before he arrived, Apollos, a convert Jew from Alexandria, sailed for Corinth with the blessing of Prisca and Aquila. The two to three years that Paul spent in Ephesus were perhaps the busiest and most productive of his life. His delegates founded churches in the hinterland. He wrote Galatians and, during an imprisonment of uncertain duration, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon.

The writing of 1 Corinthians

The events that obliged Paul to write 1 Corinthians began in April or May AD54. A wealthy woman of Ephesus, Chloe, sent some of her employees to Corinth on business. While there, they frequented the Christian community, and were profoundly shocked at some of the things they saw. Naturally, when they returned to Ephesus they related their experiences.

Paul could hardly believe that practices so much at variance with the vision of Christianity that he had tried to impart had become current at Corinth. He would have liked to think that Chloe's people had misunderstood, but the matter was too serious to push aside. It was imperative to check out their story. He sent his best assistant, Timothy, to report on the situation of the Corinthian community.

As not infrequently happens, while Timothy was on his way to Corinth, a delegation from Corinth arrived in Ephesus. His journey was no longer necessary. The delegation provided all the answers to Paul's questions. Moreover, they brought a letter informing Paul of a series of issues that were causing dissension in the community.

Paul could no longer defer writing to Corinth. He brought in Sosthenes as co-author in the belief that his intimate knowledge of the affairs of the Corinthian community would make communication easier, but quickly realized that their styles were incompatible, and in fact used him very little.

The organization of 1 Corinthians

What appears to be a complete lack of organization in 1 Corinthians has so impressed some scholars that they consider the letter to be a series of originally independent letters that a copyist strung together. The majority of commentators, however, rightly refuse this hypothesis. Nothing in 1 Corinthians demands such radical surgery.

The seeming fragmentation of 1 Corinthians is due to the fact that Paul deals with a vast array of subjects that have been thrust upon him. He is not writing a rather abstract treatise that he was free to develop in his own way. He is reacting to urgent and divisive questions raised by a number of sources. None the less, the material in 1 Corinthians is not at all as disorganized as would appear at first sight.

1. Introduction (1:1–9).
2. Divisions in the Community (1:10—4:21).

3. The Importance of the Body (5:1—6:20).
4. Responses to Corinthian Questions (7:1—14:40)
 - (a) Problems of Social Status (7:1—40).
 - (b) Problems Arising from the Pagan Environment (8:1—11:1).
 - (c) Problems in the Liturgical Assembly (11:2—14:40).
5. The Resurrection (15:1—58).
6. Conclusion (16:1—24).

The arrangement reveals a refined sense of priorities, and a knowledge of how to construct an effective argument according to the principles of rhetoric. The two most important issues were divisions in the community and the resurrection. These touched the very basics of Christianity. Paul deals first with divisions in the community but saves the resurrection for the very end. A rhetorical discourse should end with a bang, not with a whimper. It should not just taper away. The most powerful arguments should be assembled and hammered home; this is a precise description of Paul's treatment of the resurrection. Other points of lesser importance are dealt with in the middle of the letter. The experts in rhetoric called this arrangement 'Homeric' because of Homer's description of the battle dispositions on the plain before Troy, 'Nestor put his charioteers with their horses and cars in the front; and at the back a mass of first-rate infantry to serve as rear-guard. In between he stationed his inferior troops, so that even shirkers would be forced to fight' (*Iliad* 4. 299).

Although the first two chapters of Galatians are the most explicitly autobiographical material that Paul wrote, they do not reveal a fraction of what he unconsciously betrays in 1 Corinthians. The passion inspired by the variety of problems with which he has to deal in this letter force to the surface aspects of his personality that never appear elsewhere. The extraordinary ability of the Corinthians to misunderstand him provokes an intense emotion which acts as a prism that refracts in vivid colours hidden facets of his complex nature. Without 1 Corinthians we would know very little of the real Paul of Tarsus.

The GREETING

Imagine the arrival of a letter from Paul in one of his communities. It was already a minor miracle for it to have reached its destination safely. Another would be necessary to achieve its desired impact on the community.

Finding the addressees

In a world where streets had no names, and houses no numbers, the messengers—unless they were returning to their hometown—certainly had difficulty in finding the recipients. There were no church buildings that stood out from their neighbours. Christians met in homes. So Paul must have directed his letter-carriers to an individual house or apartment. We do not know how good Paul's visual memory was, but even if he gave precise directions, there was no guarantee that the landmarks he recalled still existed. Business premises regularly changed hands. The tavern on the corner might now be a bakery. A grocery store could have taken the place of a restaurant. Even if the messengers found their way to the correct address, there might be no one at home. Like everyone else, believers occasionally moved, sometimes because of a chance to ascend the social scale, sometimes through necessity. With great regularity houses collapsed or were burnt down.

Such problems highlight the extent to which Paul was forced to trust those who agreed to carry a letter for him, and hint at the anxiety with which he awaited a sign that his letter had been received. Irresponsible messengers might have made no effort. Conscientious ones might have failed. Fortunately, he knew that everything did not depend on him. He believed that the Holy Spirit was active among his converts, and that they were responsible for their own lives.

Insight, not obedience

Yet as the one who had begotten them in Christ, Paul could not stand aside as they struggled to discern the will of God. Their previous religious beliefs, their inherited social attitudes, their relations with others in the community, all led to greatly differing perceptions of what God required of them. Amidst such confusion Paul felt that he had a

role to play. It was not to tell believers what God required. Ready-made answers would keep them in a childish state, and he wanted them to be mature. His goal as a pastor was to promote, not slavish obedience, but independent insight. All he could do was to challenge them when they were going wrong, and to nudge them gently in the right direction.

Part of a wider movement

The paradox of the local Christian community is that it is both a whole and a part. It is independent in that the Holy Spirit guarantees it all the gifts necessary for its development. In this sense it needs nothing from outside. Yet it is also a facet of a much greater reality. Each local church is an incarnation of the ideal preached by Jesus. It gives continuing reality to the fact that Jesus is the power and the wisdom of God. This quality, however, is shared by all churches. Each, then, must hold much in common with others if the unity of the Jesus movement is to be real.

Each community, therefore, has both vertical and horizontal dimensions, both of which are channels of divine communication. The Corinthians were very conscious of the action of the Spirit among them. Their awareness of this privilege, however, expressed itself in a sense of superiority, which threatened to isolate them. Other Christians, they felt, had nothing to teach them. Thus, at the very beginning of the letter, Paul has to remind them of his broad mandate, and of the fact that there are others in many places who also call on the name of the Lord Jesus.

PRAYER

O God, make us conscious of the action of the Holy Spirit in others as we thank you for the gifts with which we have been endowed.

THANKSGIVING

For Paul, each of his communities was a thing of wonder. Not because they were perfect, but simply because they existed. His heart was filled with gratitude for what God had done through him.

Power in weakness

Paul was a Jew in a world in which Jews were a despised minority. He was an artisan in a world that respected only intellectual achievement. He was a stranger in a world where connections were the root of power. In the face of such odds he should have achieved nothing, and he was fully aware of the fact.

Like Jeremiah, Paul could not understand why God had chosen him for a mission for which he had no built-in advantages. He had neither wealth, nor social status. Unlike the prophet, however, Paul never begged to be discharged from his task. He might be unqualified, but results appeared. People turned from idols to the one true God. Christian communities came into being.

The yawning abyss between what he was and what he achieved became for Paul the key to understanding God's purpose in his calling. He knew perfectly well that every effect must have a proportionate cause. The discrepancy between his 'weakness' and his churches, therefore, must be only an apparent one. Those who found his resources inadequate to explain his accomplishments should be forced to recognize that another power was at work. Paul's 'weakness' made the grace of God *visible*. If Paul saw it, others should find it equally obvious. No other apologetic was necessary. God could be seen to be at work in history.

Thus, when Paul thought of the believers in the city of Corinth, whose materialism should have made any religious foundation impossible, his first reaction was gratitude, and this is why a thanksgiving is the first element in the letter. It was a moment of reassurance in a life full of stress and turmoil. The God who at times seemed distant and silent was tangibly present in his grace.

Careful compliments

The Corinthians, of course, had made their contribution to the mira-

cle. They had welcomed the grace of which Paul was the channel. The change in their lifestyle was the effect of its power. Any eradication of the selfishness characteristic of life under the power of sin was an occasion for rejoicing.

But there were changes and changes. Some were more profound and far-reaching than others. Here Paul compliments the Corinthians on the profusion of spiritual gifts that they enjoyed, but the gifts that he singles out for special mention are ‘speech’ and ‘knowledge’. These will be discussed in greater detail elsewhere in the letter—‘knowledge’ in chapter 8 and ‘speech’ in chapter 14—where it will become apparent that they did not rate very highly in Paul’s scale of values. They lent themselves too easily to selfish misuse. Given for the good of the church, they were used to enhance social status in the community.

The virtues that Paul wanted to find among his converts were the fundamentals, on which he congratulates the Thessalonians, ‘your work of faith, and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Thessalonians 1:3). It was these that made the Thessalonians an exemplary community, whose mere existence was a proclamation of the gospel (1 Thessalonians 1:6–8).

Paul’s discretion here betrays a certain sadness. The church at Corinth was not living up to his expectations, which, as always, were essentially missionary. The Corinthians did not offer the existential ‘testimony of Christ’ that the world needed. They might speak of Christ, but they did not enable others to see and hear him in their behaviour. They did not exhibit the ‘common union’ (*koinonia*) among themselves and with Jesus, which is the antithesis of the divisions that characterize the world.

PRAYER

O God, enable us to live in such a way as to make your grace a present reality in our world, so that those deafened by words may see Christ on earth.

RIVALRY

Life in the church and life in society were, for Paul, the two options open to humanity. The difference between the two cannot be exaggerated. One was the antithesis of the other. A decisive choice was imperative. And the Corinthians had not made it.

A world torn apart

Paul was an effective missionary because he had a very clear idea of the reality of the society in which he had to operate. His human world was characterized above all by divisions. Jews and Gentiles had inherited their mutual animosity, as had slaves and freemen (Galatians 3:28). But these blocks were not homogeneous. The lists of vices scattered throughout the letters (e.g. Romans 1:29–31; 1 Corinthians 5:10–11; 6:9–10) help us to look beneath the surface.

In them Paul highlights social attitudes which make genuine communication impossible. Other people was seen as a threat, with the result that individuals lived in separate compartments, cut off from others by barriers of fear and suspicion. Such isolation facilitated the propagation of the sin of ‘covetousness’ (Romans 7:7). Energy was focused on the possession of things. Even though his language is very different, Paul is describing the loneliness and materialism of our society.

The bond of unity

If division characterized society, unity should be the distinguishing mark of the Christian community. The dominant image used by Paul to convey the distinctive nature of the church was that of the human body (1 Corinthians 10:17; 12:12). He also spoke of it as an olive tree (Romans 11:24).

Both of these are living things, whose unity is organic. Their constituent parts are all different—arms are not legs, and roots are not leaves—but they share a common existence. They are what they are because they belong. A sawn-off branch or a severed limb is no longer alive. Isolation changes their very natures.

Paul may have been brought to this very careful choice of images by his visits to healing temples in Asia Minor and Greece. Their walls

were covered with replicas of bodily parts, which were offered by grateful patients to celebrate the power of the god. It did not take a great leap of the imagination for Paul to see the parallel between individuals in society and these replicas. Both were travesties of what they should be. An arm was truly an arm only when it formed part of a body. People were truly alive only when they belonged to a community.

Party factions

It should now be obvious why the first problem that Paul deals with in this letter is the lack of unity among the Corinthians. It was the most fundamental failure that he could imagine, and he was profoundly shocked. Their selfish attitude contradicted the most distinctive feature of the church. What should have been a challenge to society was transformed into its accomplice. The bond of life-giving love had given way to the barriers of death. The church could no longer fulfil its salvific mission.

To underline the seriousness of the matter Paul asks the Corinthians if they realize that they have split up Christ. This unusual use of 'Christ' to mean the community was intended to shock the Corinthians into recognizing that the church is Christ in the world. Christ must be alive in their love in order to be active in society. A dismembered Christ can do nothing.

Acceptance of worldly standards in any sphere of Christian life is disastrous. In Paul's own case, to use the verbal tricks of professional orators in the proclamation of the gospel would be to empty the cross of Christ of its salvific power. Ministers do not create grace but they can nullify it.

PRAYER

O God, let not my pride in judgment or principle contribute to divisions within the church. May I recognize that to be is to belong, and to accept that it is my love that helps to make Christ real in the world.

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