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A WINDOW ON CORINTH

INTRODUCTION

First Corinthians speaks to people in all times and all places. But when Paul first wrote that letter, he had some specific problems to solve with a particular group of people. Instead of applying the truth in general, Paul tailored it to meet the Corinthians' specific needs. He knew what truth was needed and how to apply it. Therefore, 1 Corinthians was the result of Paul's applying what he knew about the ways of God to the particular problems and needs of the Corinthians.

The following material surveys the key problems and truths in 1 Corinthians. Several of those are illustrated by opposites—wise/foolish, strong/weak, and spiritual/unspiritual.

Wisdom and Foolishness

Paul mentions wisdom and foolishness over thirty times in 1 Corinthians.¹ “Wisdom” and “wise” are used twenty-three times in chapters 1–3 and occur only three more times in the remaining thirteen chapters. The topic of foolishness occurs nine times in the first three chapters. In the next thirteen chapters, the concept

occurs only with reference to the apostles' being fools for Christ's sake (4:10), and to the fool who mockingly asked about the kind of body the dead would receive at the resurrection (15:36). The first chapters of the letter, therefore, focus on the contrast of wisdom and foolishness.

But the Corinthians previously had their own ideas about what made a person wise or foolish. They split into factions that exalted the personalities of ministers (1:10–12); they contemplated changing their marital or social status to become more “spiritual” (7:17–24); they despised Christians who did not eat certain foods (8:9–13); they turned the Lord's Table into a banquet free-for-all (11:20–22); they denied honor to the less “flashy” gifts of the Spirit (12:20–26); and they toyed with rejecting the teaching that a physical resurrection was essential for eternal life (15:12).

Paul knew those actions violated God's definitions of wisdom. He viewed the Corinthians' self-made wisdom through the cross of Christ, and he saw that their wisdom was void in its meaning and power (1:17). Presenting the solution to the problem of nullifying the cross occupied Paul throughout his letter.

Knowledge

The concepts of “knowing” and “knowledge” occur over thirty times in 1 Corinthians and are closely linked to the idea of wisdom. The Corinthians were gifted by God in the area of knowledge (1:5), but that God-given knowledge did not operate automatically. It needed to be practiced. Because the Corinthians lacked maturity, they ended up acting ignorantly in many crucial areas.

Paul, therefore, had to remind them of much they should have already known. Several of Paul's reminders started with an introductory, “Do you not know?” Did they not know that the Spirit of

God dwelled in them (3:16; 6:19); that sin could infect the entire community (5:6); that Christians would judge the world (6:2); that the unrighteous would not inherit the kingdom of God (6:9); that their bodies were members of Christ (6:15); and that there was physical unity created between a man and a prostitute (6:16)?

God gave them knowledge, but that did not automatically ensure it would be practiced. The Corinthians took God's knowledge and turned it to their own selfish ends by adding other standards such as individual personality, method of ministry, and ability in speech.

By contrast, Paul reminded them of his singular but all-encompassing knowledge. He came knowing only Christ, and Him crucified (2:2). He asserted that there was only one source for true knowledge, the Spirit of God (2:11–12), and that true knowledge would always be coupled with love (8:1; 13:2). As a result, the ministering of knowledge would be intelligible, not hidden from the minds of hearers (14:11, 16).

Above all, Paul put the function and worth of knowledge into historical perspective. It was only temporary and would be done away with when the fullness of knowledge came face-to-face (13:8). Why did the Corinthians act as if their knowledge was the end of the process and eternal in scope (4:8)? It was because they did not remember their knowledge was only for the “when I was a child” (13:11) stage and would be put away like an old toy to embrace the full knowledge of God (13:8–12).

The Weak and the Strong

One criterion for the status of wisdom in Corinth was one's social strength.² That included both the idea of riches and social status (1:26–28; 4:7–8; 6:5–7; 11:22). Although there was nothing inherently wrong with those things, the Corinthians began

equating them with spiritual standing, to the point that they considered speaking in tongues as part of that status (12:29–31). Paul labored throughout his letter to show them where true strength and status lay, and to show that he viewed their lives through the cross of Christ (2:2).

Arrogance and Boasting

One destructive result of the Corinthians' views of wisdom and status was boasting and arrogance. The word translated "arrogant" or "puffed up" occurs six times in 1 Corinthians, and only once again in the New Testament in Colossians 2:18. The frequent usage of this word in 1 Corinthians sheds light on the attitudes of the Corinthian Christians.

The Corinthians were arrogant to each other (4:6). Some were arrogant in the face of Paul's upcoming visit (4:18), to which he replied that he would come and find out "not the words of those who are arrogant but their power" (4:19). Some were arrogant about the sin of a brother (5:2). When addressing the problem of despising a weaker brother, Paul claimed that "knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies" (8:1). In a more positive vein, Paul declared that love "is not arrogant" (13:4).

How did the Corinthians become so inflated in their self-opinion? They judged themselves and others. Once they had judged themselves (favorably, of course), they began to boast. That idea is found throughout the letter (1:29, 31; 3:21; 4:7; 5:6; 9:15–16; 15:31).

Judge, Test, and Examine

Seven different Greek words for "judging" are used over thirty-five times throughout 1 Corinthians. Those words are translated "appraise," "examine," "judge," "judgment," "tempt," "try," "test,"

and “approved.”

The Corinthians’ turning to arrogance and boasting was based on faulty judgment, according to human standards. That judgment ignored the important future judgment of the day of the Lord (4:5). Therefore, those premature judgments resulted in faulty evaluations of God’s ministers (2:14–15; 4:3–4); an acceptance of sin (5:3); a secular approach to lawsuits (6:1); a fear that certain sexual and social relationships could deter Christian purity (7:1, 12–14, 17, 20, 24, 26, 36, 39); selfish evaluations of the place of meats sacrificed to idols (10:25, 27); a false evaluation of the purity of the body of Christ at the Lord’s Table (11:28–29); and a tendency to misjudge the worth of spiritual gifts and prophecy (14:24).

The attitude of the Corinthians was summed up in a phrase that occurs twice in the letter: “all things are lawful” (6:12; 10:23). But they forgot the one essential addition to that statement of freedom—all things must edify.

Edification

Edification was in the opposite direction from the Corinthians’ perception of freedom. Their views on wisdom, spirituality, meats, and spiritual gifts all needed the redirective force of edification (3:9; 8:1, 10; 10:23; 14:3–5, 12, 17, 26). Paul’s standard for edification was the cross of Christ, the very thing the Corinthians were nullifying in their efforts to maintain status (1:17).

Authority

Though Paul’s consistent solution to those problems was applying the cross of Christ, at one point he dealt with criticism of his ministry by including the concept of authority. The defense of his authority occurs in chapter 9 and centers on his rights to

work or not to work (9:6, 12). The Corinthians concluded that because Paul did not accept their support, he was inferior to other apostles. Paul dealt with that criticism at length in 2 Corinthians 11–12. In 1 Corinthians 9, however, he revealed his underlying reason for not accepting support and other facets of apostolic privilege: he wanted to identify with all groups in order to save as many as possible (9:19–22). The Corinthians missed the working of the cross of Christ because they focused on worldly standards of status.

World

The Corinthians tended to be worldly in their thinking. In order to correct that mindset, Paul presented the true context for their wrong desires. He used two words for that concept: “age” and “world.” Paul contrasted the worth of this age with: God’s evaluation of it based on the cross of Christ (1:20, 27–28; 3:18–19); the insight brought by the Spirit (2:6–8); the hostile attitude of some toward the apostles (4:9–13); the final subjection of the world to judgment by the saints (6:2); and the world’s temporary and condemned nature (7:31; 11:32).

The Cross of Christ

When confronted with the Corinthians’ problems, the truth that sprang to Paul’s mind and controlled his thoughts and words was the truth of Christ.

Concerning the problem of division and arrogance in the community (1:18–6:20), Paul applied the cross in wisdom (1–4, especially 1:13 and 4:7). He applied the cross to immorality in the body (5–6; especially 5:7 and 6:19–20). When confronting the problem of false and true sexual purity (7:1–40), Paul applied the cross to the adequacy of their calling (7:17). For the problem

of self-limitation and lack of edification (8:1–11:1), he showed how the cross demanded the kind of freedom that edified and saved (8:12; 10:15–16).

For the problem of community order (11:2–14:40), Paul applied the cross to the life of the church and its freedom to love and edify (11:27; 12:12). Facing the problem of doubt about the resurrection (15:1–58), Paul applied the cross to the new order of the resurrection (15:20–28).

Paul did not address a single problem without relating that problem to the work of God through Christ. That is not only a revelation into the mind of Paul, but also of how we should learn to address our own problems and those of the world around us.

Broad Structural Overview

The letter is framed by two mentions of Paul's itinerary. The first is in 4:18–21, which served as a transition to the weighty matters in chapters 5–15, especially chapter 5. It was a harsh and threatening statement of his intentions to come and judge. But it was also a loving plea that Paul might come in love and gentleness.

At the second mention of his pending arrival (16:3–9), he revealed that he would not be coming to Corinth by sea directly from Ephesus. Instead, he would come to them by the land route that passed through Macedonia. The Corinthian reaction to that change of itinerary is clearly seen throughout 2 Corinthians. But its effect on the contents of 1 Corinthians was to place Paul's pending arrival before the readers in the hope that they would solve their problems before he arrived.³

Therefore, the discussions of purity (5:1–7:40), idols and sacrifices (8:1–11:1), traditions (11:2–33), spiritual gifts (12:1–14:40), and the resurrection (15:1–58) were framed within the fact of Paul's coming either in love or in discipline.

Paul's Prior Relations with Corinth⁴

The problems highlighted in the section above may be summarized as follows. The Corinthians had fallen into serious errors based on arrogance developed from worldly wisdom that focused on riches, social standing, and personality traits. Paul was judged as an inferior apostle, one who could be left behind (4:6, 8) as the Corinthians marched on in their kingdom living. Paul's speech and lifestyle were criticized. But he was used to such criticism. A brief look at his life before Corinth will help us understand how God prepared him for addressing the Corinthians' problems.

From Macedonia to Athens

Paul had thought through one area of criticism, his work and support, long before he entered Corinth. In the Thessalonian correspondence he argued that Christians ought to work for their food (1 Thess. 2:7–10), and he used himself as a model of self-support (2 Thess. 3:6–15). Paul addressed that worldview at length in 1 Corinthians 9.

Paul, during much persecution, left Thessalonica, passed through Berea (Acts 17:10), and entered Athens. Paul sarcastically used his persecuted lifestyle to show how far he had been left behind by the exalted and reigning Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:8–14).

The First Visit to Corinth

Paul came to Corinth (Acts 18:1) in weakness, fear, and trembling (1 Cor. 2:1–5). He labored with Priscilla and Aquila in the making of tents (Acts 18:3), an endeavor that would be thrown back in his face as an indication that he was neither strong nor using his full apostolic rights (1 Cor. 9:6, 15; 2 Cor. 11:7–9; 12:13).

Paul endured a lot of hostility in Corinth—so much so



CITIES OF PAUL'S AEGEAN ITINERARY

that the Lord gave him a special vision telling him not to fear (Acts 18:9–10). When Paul was taken to court by the Jewish leaders, the verdict of Gallio the judge⁵ was that Christianity was only a problem of religious differences within the Jewish faith (Acts 18:12–17). That did not stop the physical abuse, however (Acts 18:17).

Even though the Corinthians had several opportunities to observe their apostle undergoing persecution, some had determined that such a life was all right for Paul, but certainly was not for them. The Corinthians apparently had forgotten, or never realized, that Paul's suffering was not only a link to Christ's suffering,

but also had implications for their own lifestyles.

Paul stayed in Corinth at least one and one-half years (Acts 18:11), and then he returned home to Antioch in Syria.

The Second Visit to Corinth

The second visit of Paul to Corinth was only briefly mentioned in 2 Corinthians 13:2. But that visit was of great importance.

I have previously said when present the second time, and though now absent I say in advance to those who have sinned in the past and to all the rest as well, that if I come again I will not spare anyone, since you are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me, and who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you. (2 Cor. 13:2–3)

Those verses highlight several important insights into the situation before, during, and after the second visit. (1) The problem was so severe during Paul's second visit that he had to threaten severe discipline. (2) That threat was made with reference to his return because the situation was not corrected during his second visit. Paul concluded that he should depart and in absence work to solve the problem. (3) The problem centered on proof that Christ spoke through Paul (2 Cor. 13:3). Did he have acceptable credentials? Some were saying no.

There is much debate over whether Paul's second visit was before or after the writing of 1 Corinthians.⁶ The itinerary followed in this commentary concludes that Paul heard about the problems in Corinth when he arrived in Ephesus on his second missionary journey (Acts 19:1–20). He made the second visit to Corinth (not recorded in Acts), where he did what he could to gain a hearing. That attempt failed, and Paul left with an ultima-

tum: if he returned he would spare no one (2 Cor. 13:2). Then, after his departure, he sent a letter telling the Corinthians to avoid immoral Christians (1 Cor. 5:9), no doubt speaking to the primary issue of debate during his second visit. Later, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to clear up both new and old problems. Second Corinthians was written shortly afterward.⁷

That itinerary is based on several conclusions. (1) First Corinthians 16:5–7 speaks of a change of itinerary. (2) Second Corinthians 1:15–16 reflects Paul’s original plan, and 1 Corinthians 16:5–7 states his “Plan B.” Paul, on or before his second visit, had spoken of a final double visit (2 Cor. 1:15–16) before he left for Jerusalem. The pain of his second visit caused him to stay away as long as possible, returning only after he passed through Macedonia (1 Cor. 16:5–7).⁸ Others hold that Paul initially planned to travel to Corinth by way of Macedonia (1 Cor. 16:5–7), but later changed his journey to the double visit plan of 2 Corinthians 1:15–16.⁹ (3) If 1 Corinthians 16:5–7 was a change from the original double-visit plan, then Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 1:23, “I did not come again to Corinth,” meant that he had not been to Corinth since he wrote 1 Corinthians. A visit between 1 and 2 Corinthians would be excluded, and Paul’s second visit would have been made prior to the writing of 1 Corinthians. That view of 1 Corinthians 16:5–7 and 2 Corinthians 1:23 produces the following order of events: first visit; second visit; lost letter (1 Cor. 5:9); 1 Corinthians; 2 Corinthians; third visit.

The Occasion of First Corinthians

After his second visit and follow-up letter (mentioned in 1 Cor. 5:9), several things happened in Corinth that caused Paul to write yet another letter (1 Corinthians). Word reached him through several avenues. Chloe’s people reported that the church had split

into several factions, each claiming the authority of a well-known figure: Paul, Peter, Apollos, or Christ (1:12).

Some had become arrogant regarding Paul's return, which he had promised during his second visit. (See the reference to that promise in 2 Cor. 13:2.) They had misunderstood Paul's letter about immoral associations and allowed an immoral brother to fellowship with the Christian community (5:1–2). Some asserted a superior wisdom, one that surpassed even Paul's (4:7–10). Evidently, they felt that Paul's words carried little weight (4:18). True, Paul said he would return with full discipline (2 Cor. 13:2), but they were not convinced that he had enough clout to worry about his visit.

Not all was gloomy, however. The Corinthians were doing generally well (1:4–7) and were worthy of praise (11:2). Paul also had, from his second visit, firsthand knowledge of their overall condition.

The Corinthians also sent a letter asking several questions, probably highlighted by the “now concerning” phrases throughout 1 Corinthians (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1). The last question concerned the collection for the poor in Jerusalem (16:1–4). Titus had helped begin this work (2 Cor. 8:6, 10), and now the Corinthians needed to clarify some details.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians during his two-year stay in Ephesus (Acts 19:1–10). The visitors from Corinth had arrived, as had the questions from the church. Paul had sent Timothy to remind the Corinthians of Paul's ways (4:17), and he expected him to return to Ephesus (16:10–11). Titus departed for Corinth, probably carrying 1 Corinthians, with orders to meet Paul in Troas.

Titus had been to Corinth in the past year to arrange the offering (2 Cor. 8:6, 10, 9:2) in which the Corinthians were willing to participate. If 1 Corinthians was written in the spring of AD 57

and 2 Corinthians in the autumn of the same year,¹⁰ then these mentions of a preparation one year past put the date of Titus' work in AD 56. During that time, Paul was not only making preparations for the Corinthians' offering, but for one in Galatia as well (16:1). The offering for Paul's countrymen was a high priority and was part of Paul's conclusion of 1 Corinthians.

CONCLUSION

In addressing the Corinthian problems, Paul did not write all he could have. The Corinthians' specific troubles provided the grid by which he selected only the truths that would effectively speak to his readers. Just as Paul saw the targets for his truth, we must see them also in order to understand the letter of 1 Corinthians. Perhaps we will find similar targets in our own lives that need to be pierced with the same arrows Paul shot so long ago.

OUTLINE

- I. Wisdom and the Cross (1:1–2:16)
 - A. Greeting (1:1–3)
 - B. Thanksgiving: Grace Given (1:4–9)
 - C. Unity by Imitating Paul's Ways in Christ (1:10–2:16)
- II. Wisdom and Leadership (3:1–4:21)
 - A. Paul's Past and Present Inability: The Corinthians "As Men" (3:1–4)
 - B. The Correct Perspective on Leadership (3:5–4:5)
 - C. Final Invitation and Appeal: Results of Being Apart From Paul (4:6–17)
 - D. Arrogance in Paul's Absence (4:18–21)
- III. Sexual and Social Purity (5:1–7:40)
 - A. Judging Immorality in the Church (5:1–13)

- B. Use of Unbelievers (6:1–11)
- C. Relation of the Body to the Trinity and Immorality (6:12–20)
- D. Sex and Marriage: Staying or Changing (7:1–40)
- IV. Concerning Idols and Their Sacrifices (8:1–11:1)
 - A. Introduction: Knowledge (8:1–3)
 - B. The Effect of Knowledge Without Love (8:4–13)
 - C. Why Paul Restricted Himself for the Weak and Ignorant (9:1–27)
 - D. Past and Present Disqualifications (10:1–22)
 - E. Application (10:23–11:1)
- V. The Traditions: Kept and Unkept (11:2–34)
 - A. Praise for Kept Traditions: Women's Headcoverings (11:2–16)
 - B. No Praise for Unkept Traditions: The Lord's Table (11:17–34)
 - C. Summary (11:33–34)
- VI. Spiritual Gifts and Love: Edification (12:1–14:40)
 - A. The Source and Worth of Spiritual Gifts (12:1–31)
 - B. The Better Way: Love (13:1–13)
 - C. The Better Way Applied to Spiritual Gifts (14:1–40)
- VII. The Question of the Resurrection (15:1–58)
 - A. I Make Known the Gospel (15:1–2)
 - B. Foundations of the Gospel (15:3–11)
 - C. Implications of Denying Christ's Resurrection (15:12–19)
 - D. Solidarity and Subordination Described (15:20–28)
 - E. An Example and a Rebuke (15:29–34)
 - F. Specific Questions about the Resurrection (15:35–49)
 - G. All Must Change to Enter the Kingdom (15:50–57)
 - H. Conclusion (15:58)

VIII. With a View to Paul's Future Arrival (16:1–24)

A. The Collection (16:1–4)

B. Paul's Itinerary (16:5–9)

C. Timothy and Apollos (16:10–12)

D. Closing Exhortations (16:13–18)

E. Greetings from Aquila and Prisca and Paul (16:19–24)