

First Epistle to the Corinthians - Introduction

by Arno Clemens Gaebelein

The sermon introduces the First Epistle to the Corinthians, highlighting its practical focus on addressing moral and ethical issues within the church amidst a corrupt society.

Scripture: Acts 18:1, 1 Corinthians 1:18, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Corinthians 11:23, 1 Corinthians 12:4, 1 Corinthians 15:51, 1 Corinthians 16:13

Topics: "Church Testimony", "Spiritual Gifts"

Description

Arno Clemens Gaebelein delves into the Epistles addressed to the Corinthians, emphasizing the practical character of these letters in dealing with serious conditions that arose in the church at Corinth. He explores the historical and cultural background of Corinth, a city known for its wealth, commerce, and moral corruption, providing context for understanding the challenges faced by the early church. Gaebelein highlights the Apostle Paul's ministry in Corinth, where he preached the simple yet powerful message of Jesus Christ crucified amidst a city steeped in immorality and idolatry. The sermon focuses on the importance of the church's testimony in the world, the significance of spiritual gifts and church order, and the hope of the resurrection for believers.

Transcript

Introduction

The two Epistles addressed to the Corinthians follow, in our New Testament, the Epistle to the Romans. A more logical arrangement would be to put the Epistle to the Galatians next to Romans, for the Galatian Epistle contains the defense of the Gospel and its message is closely linked with the truths unfolded in Romans. Ephesians and Colossians lead upon still higher ground, and if the arrangement of the Pauline Epistles is to be made according to progressive revelation, these two documents should follow the Epistle to the Galatians. While Romans, Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians are preeminently doctrinal Epistles, the Epistles to the Corinthians, while not excluding Christian doctrines, are more of a practical character, dealing with very grave and serious conditions which had arisen in the church at Corinth.

The Church at Corinth

Corinth was one of the foremost Grecian "" cities, the capital of the Province of Achaia. The Roman proconsul resided there (Acts 18:12). Corinth had a very excellent situation, which gave to the city commercially a great advantage and was therefore known for its vast commerce and great wealth. Its

large population had a cosmopolitan character, thousands of traders and mariners of all nations visited the far-famed city. Greek civilization flourished here in all its branches. The fine arts were cultivated, athletic games as well as schools of philosophy and rhetoric flourished in this proud city. But the worst feature was an open and very gross licentiousness. The whole city was steeped in immoralities of various kind. Drunkenness, gluttony, and above all religiously licensed prostitution were in Corinth at its worst. The Greek worship of Aphrodite was of the most degraded nature. So great was the moral corruption that the Greek word "Corinthiazesthai," which means "to live like a Corinthian," had become a byword of shame and vileness among the profligate heathen of that time. The horrible picture of vileness as given in the Epistle to the Romans (chapter 1), written by the Apostle in Corinth, describes some of these moral conditions prevailing in Corinth. It has well been said, "The geographical position of Corinth was its weal and its woe."

The Apostle Paul had been in Athens first and then came to Corinth (Acts 18:1). While the origin of the church in Rome is obscure, we know that the Corinthian assembly was founded by the Apostle. The record of it we find in Acts 18. He labored there under great blessing for a year and six months. Jews and Gentiles were saved, among the former was Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue. But the majority of those who believed were Gentiles, and these belonged to the poorer classes (1 Corinthians 1:26) with at least two exceptions, Erastus, the chamberlain of the city, and Gaius, a wealthy man, whom Paul had baptized. The historical account of Paul's ministry in Corinth and what happened there should be carefully read, for it throws light upon the Epistles he sent to that church.

What he preached in that wealthy and wicked city, boasting of culture and much learning, filled with an arrogant pride, we learn from his own words in the first Epistle. "And I, brethren, when I came unto you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (2:1-2). He was greatly pressed in spirit while there (Acts 18:5), yea, in fear and trembling (1 Corinthians 2:3). He knew this was one of Satan's strongholds. But God stood by His servant, and while his preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, it was in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power (1 Corinthians 2:4).

Both Epistles reveal the deplorable state of the Corinthians and these conditions called forth through the energy of the Holy Spirit this first Epistle. The evil things which had sprung up among the Corinthians had been reported to the Apostle. The house of Chloe (chapter 1:11) is mentioned, as informing him about the contentious spirit which was manifesting itself. Probably from the same source as well as from others, he heard even of worse things which were making headway among the believers. Gross immorality was being tolerated in their midst; lawsuits of Christians were being submitted to courts over which pagan judges presided; they had degraded the blessed memorial feast, the Lord's supper, on account of which some had been dealt with by the Lord. Then there were other matters, such as disorder in public worship, abuse of certain gifts, the forwardness of women. Controversies must have also agitated the Corinthian assembly about the marriage state, certain church matters, such as collections, the exercise of gifts, etc. They had not been brought up Christians, and had everything to learn. This fully explains the character of this first Epistle.

When and Where Was the Epistle Written?

Attempts have been made to question the authenticity of the First Corinthian Epistle. They have not, however, been successful. Testimonies to the authorship of this document are found in the writings of Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and others. Dean Alford states,

"As far as I am aware, the authorship of the First Epistle to the Corinthians has never been doubted by any critic of note. Indeed, he who would do so must be prepared to dispute the historical truth of the character of St. Paul." The Epistle itself answers our question concerning the place and the time when it was written by the Apostle. The statement at the close of the Epistle, printed in some editions of the Bible "written from Philippi," is incorrect. In chapter 16:8 we read the writer's statement, "But I will tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost." The Apostle Paul was therefore in Ephesus and intended to leave about Pentecost. The Book of Acts shows that he left that city about the time of Pentecost in the year 57. It is quite certain that this first Epistle to the Corinthians was written during the first part of the year 57, probably around the time of Easter. (See 1 Corinthians 5:7-8). From Acts 19:22 we learn that the Apostle, while still in Ephesus, had sent Timotheus and Erastus to Macedonia. He had given commission to Timotheus to go to Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10). No doubt Timotheus was to prepare the way for the visit of the Apostle (1 Corinthians 4:17-19). In all probability the Epistle was taken to Corinth by Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus (1 Corinthians 16:17).

But are the two Corinthian Epistles the only epistles Paul wrote to them? In chapter 5:9 Paul says: "I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators." From this we learn that he had written them a previous letter. Commentators have spoken of this letter as a lost epistle. If it was an inspired document, like these two Epistles and the other Pauline Epistles, it would certainly have been preserved. But the Apostle also wrote letters which were not meant to form parts of the Word of God, which were not inspired, as Romans, Ephesians and the other epistles are. The Epistle therefore mentioned in chapter 5:9 was a private letter of the Apostle.

Important and Practical Truths

The church, constituting the fellowship of the Saints on earth, its place and testimony in the world; the church, its order, membership, spiritual gifts and manifestations, discipline and other important matters, are the truths dealt with in this first Epistle. Then, after the church is viewed as on earth, as His witness, the great truth of the resurrection of the body is made known as well as the fact that when the Lord comes "we shall not all sleep, but shall be changed in a moment." This puts before us the blessed hope, the great consummation, when the church will leave this earthly scene of conflict and failure and become, according to promise, the glorious church.

All about us in the professing church manifests the fullest failure and ruin. The evils which were in the Corinthian church such as sectarianism, self-indulgence and worldliness have become the prominent features of the institution which claims to be the church. For the true believer whose aim it is to be obedient to the Lord in all things, this Epistle has a message and shows him the way which he can follow, though failure and confusion is about him.

The Division of First Corinthians

On account of the different topics and questions treated of in this epistle, a division into well defined sections is rather difficult to make. The epistle is a church epistle, dealing throughout with matters concerning the church. A careful reading of the epistle will disclose the fact that first, the church is viewed as the temple of God indwelt by His Spirit. As such the church is in the world, though not of the world, and is called to be separated from the world and all its wisdom. The world is hostile to the church; the activities of the enemy of the truth, through the wisdom of this world and the lusts of the flesh are learned from the state of the church in Corinth. The church and her relation to the world, and the testimony for Christ, the

church is to give and to maintain in the world, are unfolded in the first ten chapters of this epistle. After that, the church is viewed as the body of Christ. In chapter 11-14 no more mention is made of the world and the believer's conduct in the world. We are introduced to church order, the activities of the church, the body and its members, the ministries and the exercise of the different gifts, bestowed upon the body. Then follows the great chapter which deals with resurrection. The doctrine of resurrection is unfolded in chapter 15; first, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is Himself the head of the body, and also the resurrection and translation of His people. The glorious destiny of the church is therefore revealed at the close of the epistle. The concluding chapter contains an instruction concerning collection and the greetings. This brief survey of the epistle, showing its scope, gives us three main divisions:

I. THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD. SEPARATION AND TESTIMONY. CHAPTERS 1-10

1. What Grace Has Done and the Assurance which Grace Gives. Chapter 1:1-9.
2. Contrasts. Chapter 1:10-4.
3. Corinthian Failures. Chapters 5-6.
4. Concerning the Relationship of Man and Woman. Chapter 7.
5. Concerning Meats Offered to Idols. Liberty Governed by Love. Chapter 8.
6. Paul's Gracious Example. Chapter 9.
7. Concluding Warnings and Exhortations. Chapter 10.

II. THE CHURCH AS THE BODY OF CHRIST. CHAPTERS 11-14

1. The Headship of Christ and of Man. The Lords Supper. Chapter 11.
2. The Body and the Members of the Body. Chapter 12.
3. The Need and Superiority of Love. Chapter 13.
4. Prophecy and Speaking with Tongues. Chapter 14.

III. RESURRECTION AND THE HOPE OF THE CHURCH. CONCLUSIONS. CHAPTERS 15-16

1. The Doctrine of Resurrection and the Hope of the Church. Chapter 15.
2. Instruction and Greetings. Chapter 16.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/arno-clemens-gaebelein-/first-epistle-to-the-corinthians-introduction/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net