

## TYNDALES NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY ON 1 CORINTHIANS

### GENERAL PREFACE

The original Tyndale Commentaries aimed at providing help for the general reader of the Bible. They concentrated on the meaning of the text without going into scholarly technicalities. They sought to avoid ‘the extremes of being unduly technical or unhelpfully brief’. Most who have used the books agree that there has been a fair measure of success in reaching that aim.

Times, however, change. A series that has served so well for so long is perhaps not quite as relevant as it was when it was first launched. New knowledge has come to light. The discussion of critical questions has moved on. Bible-reading habits have changed. When the original series was commenced it could be presumed that most readers used the Authorized Version and comments were made accordingly, but this situation no longer obtains.

The decision to revise and update the whole series was not reached lightly, but in the end it was thought that this is what is required in the present situation. There are new needs, and they will be better served by new books or by a thorough updating of the old books. The aims of the original series remain. The new commentaries are neither minuscule nor unduly long. They are exegetical rather than homiletic. They do not discuss all the critical questions, but none is written without an awareness of the problems that engage the attention of New Testament scholars. Where it is felt that formal consideration should be given to such questions, they are discussed in the Introduction and sometimes in Additional notes.

But the main thrust of these commentaries is not critical. These books are written to help the non-technical reader understand his Bible better. They do not presume a knowledge of Greek, and all Greek words discussed are transliterated; but the authors have the Greek text before them and their comments are made on the basis of what the originals say. The authors are free to choose their own modern translation, but are asked to bear in mind the variety of translations in current use.

The new series of Tyndale Commentaries goes forth, as the former series did, in the hope that God will graciously use these books to help the general reader to understand as fully and clearly as possible the meaning of the New Testament.

Leon Morris

### AUTHOR’S PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

It is no new observation that the letters of St Paul are not easy reading (2 Pet. 3:15f.), but for him who is prepared to take time and trouble their study is immensely rewarding. Not least is this the case with 1 Corinthians, a letter arising out of the practical difficulties besetting a far-from-ideal first-century Greek church. Here we have a typical Pauline letter. The apostle praises his correspondents for their Christian virtues, and rebukes them roundly for their many failings. He adds to their knowledge with some great passages, notably his discussion of love in chapter 13 and of the resurrection in chapter 15. Whatever he touches he deals with in the light of great Christian principles. He sees things temporal always in the light of things eternal. What he writes has relevance to our own, in many ways very different, needs. He shows us how to take our problems back to the light shed upon them by the great Christian verities. We cannot fail to profit as we ponder his words.

In writing this commentary I have been greatly indebted to very many. Notably is this the case with regard to the commentaries to which I have referred in the notes. I have endeavoured to indicate my many indebtednesses in specific matters, but I have learned more from my predecessors than I can sufficiently acknowledge. I have also found some modern translations very helpful, for what are translations but compressed commentaries?

Finally I would like to express my gratitude to Miss G. Mahar and Miss M. McGregor who very kindly typed the manuscript for me.

Leon Morris

#### AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The call for a new edition of this commentary has given me the opportunity of working through the material again, with the help of much that has been written in the years since the first edition appeared. I have been grateful for the commentaries to which I have referred, and especially to those by Barrett and Conzelmann.

The change from the Authorized Version to the New International Version as the base has meant many small alterations, and I have gone further and rewritten the whole. It is essentially the same commentary, though here and there the reader may notice a change of emphasis and even sometimes of opinion.

It may help the general reader if I point out that all cross-references have been checked against the Greek text; a reference to the English translation will not always make this clear. For example, I speak of Paul's calling himself a 'slave of Christ' and refer to Romans 1:1. Now niv has there 'a servant of Christ' and the English reader may wonder a little about the accuracy of the reference. But 'servant' translates *doulos*, which means 'slave'. Despite niv, Paul really did call himself 'a slave of Christ'. It would have taken up a lot of space to make this sort of thing clear on every occasion, so I have often simply given the reference. But, as I have said, on every occasion the reference has been checked against the Greek.

It remains only for me to express the hope that in its new format this commentary will meet a continuing need. And to express my appreciation to Mrs D. Wellington, my former secretary, for her kindness in typing the manuscript so expertly.

Leon Morris

#### INTRODUCTION

##### 1. Background

The geographical position of Corinth, on the narrow neck of land between the Corinthian Gulf (where its port was Lechaëum) and the Saronic Gulf (and the port of Cenchrea) guaranteed its commercial prosperity. Merchants and sailors sent goods across the isthmus rather than risk the long voyage round the rocky, storm-tossed capes at the south of the Peloponnesus. Trade routes from east to west intersected those from north to south at this city. Corinth was totally destroyed by the Roman, L. Mummius Achaicus, in 146 bc, but when it was refounded a century later as a Roman colony it speedily regained much of its former greatness.

As the new city was a Roman colony, its inhabitants were at first Romans. Eventually Greeks came back in numbers and the city also attracted people from other races. Included among them was a Jewish population large enough to have a synagogue (Acts 18:4). The Roman element<sup>3</sup> is

illustrated by the number of Latin names associated with Corinth in the New Testament, such as Lucius, Tertius, Gaius, Erastus, Quartus (Rom. 16:21–23), Titius Justus, Crispus (Acts 18:7–8), Fortunatus and Achaicus (1 Cor. 16:17). But Greek ways of thought lie behind some of the questions raised in Paul's letters to Corinth and the manner in which they are treated. Edwards says of Corinth: 'Of Greek cities the least Greek, it was at this time the least Roman of Roman colonies.'<sup>4</sup> It was a city where 'Greeks, Latins, Syrians, Asiatics, Egyptians, and Jews, bought and sold, laboured and revelled, quarrelled and hob-nobbed, in the city and its ports, as nowhere else in Greece'.

Old Corinth had been a by-word for licentiousness, and this hotch-potch of races would have hastened the process by which the new Corinth acquired an equally unsavoury reputation. A. M. Hunter says that in the popular mind Corinth suggested 'culture and courtesans ... "Corinthian words" implied pretensions to philosophy and letters, and to "Corinthianize" was popular Greek for "go to the devil".'

Yet for all that the city was one of the most important in Greece. It was populous and wealthy.<sup>9</sup> It was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. And the finest athletes were attracted to the Isthmian Games celebrated near the city, games so important that they continued to be celebrated even when the city was destroyed (SPC, p. 14). There was fertile soil nearby, and grapes flourished (our word 'currant' derives from 'Corinth' and is a reminder of the success of the city's horticulture).

The city to which Paul came preaching the gospel was, then, a very cosmopolitan place. It was an important city. It was intellectually alert, materially prosperous, but morally corrupt. There was a pronounced tendency for its inhabitants to indulge their desires of whatever sort. In the words of von Dobschütz:

The ideal of the Corinthian was the reckless development of the individual. The merchant who made his gain by all and every means, the man of pleasure surrendering himself to every lust, the athlete steeled to every bodily exercise and proud in his physical strength, are the true Corinthian types: in a word the man who recognised no superior and no law but his own desires.

Corinth was a prestigious centre from which the gospel could radiate out to the surrounding districts. There was a large floating population, with merchants and travellers staying a few days and then going their way. Anything preached in Corinth would be sure of a wide dissemination.

## 2. Paul at Corinth

When Paul first reached Corinth he had experienced a great deal of discouragement. At Philippi he had had a promising beginning smashed by the opposition of fanatical Jews. The same thing had happened at Thessalonica and Beroea. In Athens he had had little success. Small wonder that he came to busy, proud, intellectual Corinth 'in weakness and fear, and with much trembling' (1 Cor. 2:3). His companions on this missionary journey, Silas and Timothy, were occupied in Macedonia, so that Paul was probably alone, which would not have made things any easier. In Corinth he lodged with Aquila and Priscilla, Jews who had been expelled from Rome by a decree of the Emperor Claudius (which most date in ad 49). Like Paul, they were tent-makers (=leatherworkers?) by trade. In due course Silas and Timothy rejoined him and brought news that, despite all opposition, Paul's converts at Thessalonica were standing firm. Paul saw that, despite the difficulties and discouragements he had met, the blessing of God was upon the work that he had done. The news put new heart into him and he gave himself over to the proclamation

of the gospel with renewed energy. He ‘devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ’ (Acts 18:5).

But his preaching did not prove acceptable to the Jews and he had to leave the synagogue. Not very tactfully he went to the house of Justus, right next door, and this apparently became his new preaching base.<sup>12</sup> Crispus, the ‘synagogue ruler’, believed, together with his household (Acts 18:8). But these are the only Jewish converts in Corinth of whom we read in Acts (unless Aquila and Priscilla were converted there). It is in harmony with this that Jewish names do not figure largely in the Corinthian Epistles. But many of the Corinthians believed and were baptized. Paul was encouraged by a vision, perhaps at the time of his expulsion from the synagogue, assuring him that God had ‘many people in this city’ (Acts 18:10). He remained in Corinth for eighteen months and evidently made many converts. We are not told expressly, but it seems likely that here, as elsewhere, the bulk of the believers came from the group of devout pagans who attached themselves loosely to the synagogue. They were dissatisfied with paganism and found themselves attracted by Judaism’s lofty morals and pure monotheism, but repelled by its narrow nationalism and by ritual practices like circumcision. Such people found in Christianity a faith that satisfied and was free from what they found objectionable in Judaism.

Some of the converts were people of substance. Gaius gave hospitality to Paul and to the whole church (Rom. 16:23, almost certainly written from Corinth). Erastus was ‘the city’s director of public works’ (Rom. 16:23; an inscription in Corinth speaks of an Erastus who laid down a pavement at his own expense and this might be the same man). Some see Chloe as another wealthy Corinthian Christian, but we do not know whether she was a believer or not, nor whether she came from this city or elsewhere. But Paul’s references to believers engaging in litigation and attending private banquets point to men of means. It seems, however, that these were exceptions, and that most of the believers came from the lower social strata (1 Cor. 1:26–29).

Throughout Greece the Jews tended to stir up opposition whenever Paul’s missions looked like being successful. The Thessalonian Epistles, almost certainly written from Corinth, show us something of the determined opposition he was experiencing (1 Thess. 2:15; 2 Thess. 3:1f.). He was compelled to cease preaching in the synagogue and was even brought before the proconsul Gallio and accused of ‘persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law’ (Acts 18:13). But he had broken no Roman law and Gallio refused to hear the charge. He saw it as merely a dispute among Jews (which incidentally gave Christianity protection for the time being; Gallio had classed it as part of Judaism; cf. Bruce, p. 20). Paul was free to continue his work unhindered. From the length of his stay we gather that he regarded his mission at Corinth as possibly the most important he had undertaken up to this point.

### 3. Paul’s subsequent relations with the church at Corinth

Some time after Paul left Corinth Apollos, a learned man from Alexandria, arrived there. He had been in Ephesus teaching Christianity, though he knew only John’s baptism. There Aquila and Priscilla ‘explained to him the way of God more adequately’ (Acts 18:26). Armed with this new knowledge, Apollos went to Achaia, of which province Corinth was the capital. Here his eloquence was employed in ‘proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ’ (Acts 18:28). This implies that preacher and hearers alike looked for the coming of the Messiah (the Christ). Apollos was able to say, ‘The Messiah you expect is Jesus and Scripture makes this clear.’

His method of preaching probably differed from that of Paul. Paul's preaching had a studied simplicity (1 Cor. 2:2–4), that of Apollos was probably highly rhetorical (Acts 18:24, 27–28). There was no fundamental difference in the message preached, for Paul speaks of Apollos as continuing the work that he had begun (1 Cor. 3:6, 8). But the difference in presentation was enough to cause a certain partisanship with some of the Corinthians.

Some time after this Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthian church, a letter that has perished. The evidence for its existence is Paul's statement that he had previously written a letter telling the Corinthian believers 'not to associate with sexually immoral people' (1 Cor. 5:9). We know nothing more about this letter or how Paul came to write it. Some scholars think that part of it is preserved in 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1. If, as is probable, this hypothesis is to be rejected, the letter has entirely disappeared. This need cause no surprise. The letter had been misunderstood (1 Cor. 5:9–10) and Paul mentioned it only to clear up a misconception. The newer letter superseded the older, and thus there was no point in preserving it.

Next came some contacts with the Corinthians. The household of Chloe brought him news of cliques in the church (1 Cor. 1:11). The church wrote him a letter (1 Cor. 7:1), presumably brought by Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus (1 Cor. 16:17), who would have added their own comments. Paul answered with the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. From it we learn that all was not well in the Corinthian church. There is some very plain speaking.

The situation was serious and Paul determined to send Timothy to Corinth; indeed, he had sent him before he despatched 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10–11). Timothy is joined with Paul in the salutation in 2 Corinthians, so his visit was short (if indeed he ever reached Corinth). Clearly he was not able to do much.

The situation worsened. It is curious that we do not know the nature of what was plainly a very serious dispute. It may have been one of the matters mentioned in 1 Corinthians, but if so we have no way of knowing which. But clearly it involved a denial of Paul's authority. Paul felt it necessary to leave his work in Ephesus and pay a hurried visit in the attempt to set things right. This visit is implied in passages in 2 Corinthians which speak of Paul as being ready to pay a third visit to Corinth (2 Cor. 12:14; 13:1; his second visit is past in 2 Cor. 13:2). When Paul wrote this letter he had clearly made a visit additional to the one when the church was founded. The words will not refer, as some have maintained, to Paul's intentions and not to an actual visit. As Moffatt cogently argues, 'Against people who suspected his consistency and goodwill, it would have been of little use to plead that he had honestly intended to come, that he had been quite ready to visit them.'<sup>21</sup> His references to coming again in sorrow (e.g. 2 Cor. 2:1) show that that visit had been an unpleasant one.

Some scholars place this visit before the writing of 1 Corinthians, but no good reason has been shown for this. That Epistle seems to imply one previous visit only, the one when the church was founded (e.g. 2:1; 3:2; 11:2). Another visit is foreshadowed (4:19), but is not yet an accomplished fact. Paul's knowledge of recent affairs at Corinth is not personal, but derived from Chloe's people (1:11; cf. 5:1; 11:18), and from a letter from the Corinthian church (7:1). The second visit was clearly a very painful one and the general tone of 1 Corinthians is inexplicable after such a visit. It is much more likely that the situation implied in 1 Corinthians deteriorated after the receipt of that letter. Thus the 'painful' visit became necessary. But, despite some plain speaking, it failed to clear up the situation, and Paul went away profoundly disturbed.

The apostle determined to write another letter. This obviously had a very severe tone and cost him much to write (2 Cor. 2:4; 7:8). Had it not been successful it might conceivably have meant a final rupture between Paul and this church he had founded. Like his first letter, this 'severe' letter has been lost, unless, as some scholars think, part of it is preserved in 2 Corinthians 10–13. The letter was apparently taken by Titus, who was to return via Macedonia and Troas. Paul was impatient to know how it had been received. He went to Troas but Titus was not there. Unable to rest, he crossed to Macedonia (2 Cor. 2:12–13). Here Titus met him with the news that all was well (2 Cor. 2:12–17; 7:6–7). Out of his great relief and joy Paul wrote the letter we call 2 Corinthians. Almost certainly he visited the church soon afterwards.

Thus we have knowledge of three visits Paul paid to Corinth:

1. When the church was founded.
2. The 'painful' visit.
3. A visit after 2 Corinthians had been sent.

There were four letters:

1. The 'previous' letter.
2. 1 Corinthians.
3. The 'severe' letter.
4. 2 Corinthians.

A more detailed discussion of this framework more properly belongs to the introduction to 2 Corinthians. Here it is sufficient to notice enough of the evidence for us to place 1 Corinthians in its proper place in the sequence of Paul's dealings with the church at Corinth.

#### 4. The occasion and purpose of 1 Corinthians

The immediate occasion of the Epistle was the letter Paul had received from the Corinthian church, for which a reply was necessary. But what mattered much more to Paul was clearly the news that had come to him independently of the letter. There were disquieting irregularities in the conduct of the believers at Corinth. Paul was troubled by the 'tendency on the part of some members to make the break with pagan society as indefinite as possible ... The Church was in the world, as it had to be, but the world was in the Church, as it ought not to be'. So much did this matter to Paul that he spent six chapters dealing with it before he so much as touched on the matters about which they had written to him.

Paul was troubled about the divisions within the church. Parties had been formed attaching themselves to the names of Paul, Apollos and Peter, and even that of Christ. Paul spent a lot of time dealing with this and clearly he regarded it as very serious. Then there was a case of incest, but the church had not censured the offender. 'They found it hard to hate the sensuality which in their earlier days they had regarded as divine.' There was also a quarrelsome spirit. Some church members had actually gone to law with others, and Paul felt that this had to be put right. He speaks also of sexual impurity; gross sins like this must not continue. First and foremost 1 Corinthians is a letter directed at the reformation of conduct.

Having dealt with these grave evils Paul turns to the matters mentioned in the letter written to him, questions about marriage and celibacy, about food offered to idols, probably also about public worship and spiritual gifts. Paul wrote to help his friends in their difficulties. This part of his letter contains a wonderful treatment of love (1 Cor. 13) and a magnificent passage on the resurrection, this latter elicited, it would seem, by the fact that some of the Corinthians denied

that the dead would rise (1 Cor. 15:12). The result of all this is ‘ “an inexhaustible mine of Christian thought and life.” Nowhere else in the NT is there a more many-sided embodiment of the imperishable principles and instincts which should inspire each member of the body of Christ for all time.’

Paul’s purpose then is principally to set right disorders which the Corinthians took lightly, but which he saw as grave sins. Secondly, he wrote to answer some questions put to him. Thirdly, he wrote to give doctrinal teaching, particularly on the resurrection.

Some recent scholars, notably W. Schmithals, have argued that the Epistle must be seen against a background of Gnosticism at Corinth. Gnosticism (from the Greek *gnōsis*, ‘knowledge’) appeared in a variety of forms, all stressing the importance of knowledge. Usually there was the idea of a high good God, infinitely removed from this evil world. From this God there were ‘emanations’ until a spirit appeared who was powerful enough to create but foolish enough not to see that matter is evil. A right ‘knowledge’ enables spiritual people to escape the bondage of evil matter and in due course to gain heavenly bliss. But Gnosticism, as a system, does not seem to be attested until well into the second century ad. It was eclectic, picking up ideas from many places, and some of these ideas existed in the first century. It may well be that the Corinthians held to some such ideas, but this does not make them Gnostics. The most we can say is that in Corinth there were some ideas which later were taken up and systematized by the Gnostics. But we do not need a knowledge of Gnosticism to make sense of the Corinthian correspondence.

1 Corinthians is very much an occasional letter, directed to the immediate local needs of Paul’s converts. But it would be a mistake to regard it as on that account irrelevant to our needs. The heart of man does not change, and the principles on which Paul works are just as important to us as to the Corinthians of the first century. As Godet puts it,

the tendency to make religious truths the subjects of intellectual study rather than a work of conscience and of heart-acceptance, the disposition resulting therefrom, not always to place the moral conduct under the influence of religious conviction, and to give scope to the latter rather in oratorical discourse than in vigour of holiness,—these are defects which more than one modern nation shares in common with the Greek people.

Not only does Paul deal with problems which have a way of recurring in other ages and regions; he gives us the principles on which to act. He deals with everyday problems ‘from a central point of view, and places everyday troubles in the light of eternity’.

##### 5. The authenticity of the Epistle

There seem no solid grounds for doubting the authenticity of 1 Corinthians. Robertson and Plummer can say, ‘Both the external and the internal evidence for the Pauline authorship are so strong that those who attempt to show that the Apostle was not the writer succeed chiefly in proving their own incompetence as critics.’<sup>33</sup> There is accordingly no need to do more than indicate briefly where the strength of this evidence lies.

The external attestation is all that we could wish. It is cited in 1 Clement 47:1, a first-century letter; 1 Corinthians is the first New Testament document to be cited with the name of its author. It is freely quoted by Ignatius and Polycarp and from then on is often referred to, with no doubts expressed about its authorship. None of Paul’s other letters was quoted as widely and as early as this. In the Muratorian Fragment (a list of books accepted as canonical, probably at Rome, and dating from some time after the middle of the second century) and in some other lists it is the

first of Paul's letters. No satisfactory reason has been suggested for this, but at the least it shows that 1 Corinthians was regarded as very important.

Internal evidence likewise points to Paul. The style and language are those of the universally accepted Pauline writings. The letter fits in with what we know of the situation in Corinth. It reads naturally as Paul's attempt to deal with a difficult situation. It contains forthright condemnations of the Corinthians and the very preservation of a letter like this when others of Paul's letters have been lost is strong evidence of authenticity.

There is little that need be said about the integrity of the Epistle. Some critics have suspected interpolations, but the reasons they put forward have not commended themselves. In earlier years J. Weiss held that a number of writings have been put together to form this letter and in recent years others (e.g. Héring and Hurd) have argued that the work is composite. But we must not expect the same orderly classification of topics in a letter as in a theological treatise. 1 Corinthians reads very much like an original letter. As Moffatt says, 'if some editor really put together fragments from two or three letters, he has done his work so well that it is beyond our powers to recover their original shape and sequence.'<sup>35</sup> It seems reasonably clear then that this is a genuine writing of Paul and that it is free from any substantial interpolation.

#### 6. The date and place of origin

The place of origin is indicated by Paul's statement, 'I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost' (16:8). But just when he wrote it is not immediately obvious.

Paul paid a brief visit to Ephesus immediately after he had established the church at Corinth (Acts 18:18–21), but it seems impossible to hold that our Epistle was written during this stay. There is no indication that anything was seriously amiss in the church when Paul left it, but by the time 1 Corinthians was penned much had happened. We must allow time for this. Even when trouble began it was the 'previous' letter that was sent off, not 1 Corinthians. Our letter must date from Paul's later stay in Ephesus, a period of three years (Acts 19; 20:31). If the apostle's determination to stay till Pentecost means that he left Ephesus then, we must place 1 Corinthians during the last of the three years in that city. It will be towards the beginning rather than at the end of that year, for we must allow time for the events leading up to the writing of 2 Corinthians before the year was up.

One of the important points for the chronology of the New Testament is afforded by the statement in Acts 18:12 that Gallio was proconsul of Achaia while Paul was in Corinth. The meaning appears to be that Gallio came to Corinth during Paul's time there. An inscription at Delphi gives the decision of the Emperor on a question referred to him by Gallio, and from the date of the inscription it seems that Gallio entered on his office during the early summer of ad 51. The impression left by the story in Acts is that Paul left Corinth not long after Gallio's arrival, though not immediately after it (cf. 'for some time', Acts 18:18).

There does not seem to be anything that enables us to date the Epistle with precision. The Gallio date is the last fixed point before its composition. When we allow time for the events in Acts 18:18–19:1 between Paul's departure from Corinth and his arrival at Ephesus on his third missionary journey, we see that 1 Corinthians would have been written somewhere about the mid fifties.