

The First Epistle to the Corinthians

Living as Children of the Kingdom of God

I. Introduction and Overview

A. The Importance and Contribution of First Corinthians

Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians is notably unique among the New Testament writings and it makes an invaluable contribution to the understanding and life of Christ's Church.

- First of all, First Corinthians is eminently practical: It interacts with concrete, specific issues pertaining to an actual, identifiable community of believers. (In contrast, others of Paul's epistles – notably Galatians and Ephesians – are directed toward a broader audience and are more general in their treatment of doctrine and practice.)
- Related to the matter of practicality, the specificity of the issues Paul addressed in this epistle enables it to provide indispensable insight into the challenges and struggles that mark the Christian life at both the corporate and individual levels. In a word, First Corinthians gets “down and dirty,” taking the treatment of the Christian life down into the trenches of day-to-day existence rather than “floating above the fray” in the realm of theory and general practice.
- In “getting real” with the issues of Christian living, First Corinthians presses hard against the ever-present and ruinous problem of sin and ungodliness in the Christian community as well as the individual Christian life. Paul pulled no punches with his Corinthian readers, confronting them directly with their failings and demanding that they address them with all seriousness and zeal.

But equally importantly – though sometimes missed by its readers, First Corinthians also provides strong encouragement to believers who invariably find themselves laboring to live out the reality of Christ's life in them. For, while Paul didn't ignore, minimize or excuse ungodliness in the Corinthian congregation, he also didn't conclude from it that that community consisted of empty professors of Christ. *For Paul, sin in the Church doesn't prove the absence of Christ's life as much as the failure to live into it.*

B. Reading First Corinthians

Every written text brings with it various interpretive challenges. First and foremost, short of the human author being available to explain his meaning, the reader is left to make that determination based on the text itself along with extra-textual material such as biographical information on the author, his relation to the subject matter, the occasion for the text, etc. Simply analyzing the words on the page (word studies, grammar, syntax, etc.) as the means of interpretation is woefully inadequate since *usage* determines meaning and usage is an intensely personal enterprise. People have different vocabularies, but, more importantly, they use words, grammar, phrases, expressions, etc. very differently as they seek to communicate the ideas that are in their minds. Rarely will two people express the same idea or content in exactly the same way; when they do it is only because of close interaction (such as a student with a teacher). This is why true communication requires the back-and-forth of careful, purposeful dialogue.

For this reason, the person is a fool who thinks, on the one hand, that he always communicates to others exactly what is in his mind, and, on the other, that he always knows precisely what another individual means by what he is saying. And if communication is a challenge when two people are talking to each other face-to-face, how much more is that the case when a person is attempting to hold a conversation with a written text? There are no audible or visual clues to meaning with a written text (such as inflection, tone, delivery and body language); those components of meaning have to be conveyed through the text itself, and it does so through its use of various literary devices. (The obvious implication is that a reader will fail to “hear” what a text is saying if he is deaf – for whatever reason – to its literary “speech.”)

The difficulties inherent in person-to-person communication (genuine communication being dependent on correct interpretation) are amplified when one of the communicating parties is a written text. That is true of the biblical text, but to an even greater extent than other sorts of texts.

1. As in most cases when interacting with a text, there is no human author to interrogate with the Bible. But the problem is exacerbated by the fact that the scriptural authors are so far removed from the reader. It’s one thing to rightly interpret the writings of a contemporary author who shares the same language, culture, and historical context; it’s something else altogether when the author and reader have little or nothing in common.
2. Another heightened challenge with the biblical text – and in particular the New Testament epistles – is that the reader is effectively reading someone else’s mail. He is eavesdropping on a conversation between two other parties whom he doesn’t know and whose personal, historical and cultural backgrounds are very distant and foreign to him. Added to that is the fact that he isn’t privy to the issues being addressed in the correspondence. Taken together, these considerations show the immense interpretive challenges facing the reader.

And even presuming the reader correctly understands the content of the epistle, that fact in itself doesn’t tell him what he’s to do with his insight. After all, he’s reading someone else’s mail, not a letter written to him. And yet, if that letter is indeed inspired Scripture, he must do *something* with it; he must take something from it, and that “something” must be what God Himself intends. Richard Hays’ comments are illuminating:

“What are we to do with the information gained by eavesdropping on this conversation between the agitated apostle and his refractory followers [speaking of the First Corinthian epistle]? How does it speak to us? Paul, after all, was not aiming to write timeless truth or even a general theological treatise; rather, he was giving direct pastoral instruction for one community that faced a specific set of problems in the middle of the first century. For example, was it permissible to eat meat sold in the market if the meat came from an animal sacrificed to a pagan god? What does it mean to take Paul’s advice on such a topic, addressed to ancient people in a very different world almost two thousand years ago, and to declare it to be Scripture? What hermeneutical maneuvers permit us to read these particular pastoral instructions as God’s word to us? We are so accustomed to thinking of First Corinthians as part of ‘our’ Bible that we seldom see the full complexity of this interpretive problem.”

3. And if that weren't enough, the interpretive challenge is further enlarged by the fact that the Bible consists of a collection of individual *texts* that together comprise a harmonious, organically-related *Text*. This is where things get especially sticky:

- a. First of all, while most readers of the Scripture (certainly Christians) recognize that the individual books of the Bible are related to one another as parts of a whole, multitudes don't understand the *nature* of that relationship. Some go no further than relating Scripture books based on which testament they appear in; more often Christians relate and organize individual texts on the basis of historical chronology or doctrinal emphasis. In the case of the New Testament, Christians often organize texts on the basis of their authorship (so the *Pauline epistles*), their orientation (the *general epistles*) or their subject matter (the *Gospels*).

While such organizing schemes are of some use, they fail to account for the fact that the Bible is an organic *Text* in which every individual text is related to the whole, but in a precise and multifaceted manner. The various texts that comprise the Scripture may be compared to the individual parts of a living organism, and that analogy helps to underscore the truth that understanding a given scriptural text depends utterly upon situating it properly within the organic *Text* (organism) and then interpreting it by observing it in its various relations to the whole.

The primary organizing feature of the biblical *Text* is its *salvation-historical storyline*. Beginning with the opening verses of Genesis, the Scripture – in all of its individual texts – is telling the story of God's eternal purpose for His creation and the outworking and accomplishment of that purpose in time and space. It is precisely because Jesus Christ is the focal point of that purpose and work that He is the grand subject of all the Scriptures: It is the reason He – and His disciples – asserted that all the Scriptures – the individual texts – speak of Him; it is the reason the New Testament writers everywhere interpreted the Scriptures (the Old Testament writings) in terms of Jesus' person and work. Any attempt at interpreting a biblical text that doesn't begin here is doomed to failure.

- b. The interpreter must recognize that the Scripture is organized according to a Christ-centered storyline detailing God's activity toward the accomplishment and consummation of His grand, all-encompassing purpose for His creation. And because that storyline plays out on the stage of human history, it is both historically *situated* (set on an historical timeline) and historically *conditioned* (revealed, developed, advanced and interpreted in terms of historical features and considerations) in its parts as well as the whole.

These truths highlight the second challenge to interpreting a given biblical text, namely situating that text within the biblical storyline. This obviously involves locating it at the right place in history (its *historical context*), but that is only the starting point. Far more important – indeed critical to correct interpretation – is locating the text at the right point in the progress of God's outworking of His saving and restoring purposes in Jesus Christ (its *salvation-historical context*).

So for instance, the fact that Ezekiel's prophecy was written from Babylon during the early phase of Judah's captivity and exile contributes nothing *in itself* toward understanding that text. In order to interpret Ezekiel's prophecy one must situate its historical setting in its proper place within the overall scheme of the salvation history. *The only way for a person to discern the "meaning" of his present location is for him to know where he's been, where he's going, and what the purpose is for his journey.* So a car's occupant can examine every detail of his vehicle's interior and even take note of the mile marker on the road, and yet that knowledge leaves him completely in the dark as to the meaning of his situation.

4. So it is with the First Corinthian epistle: Matters such as its authorship, date and occasion of writing, recipients, major themes, etc. play a role in the interpretive process, but are insufficient in themselves. The same is true of the letter's linguistic features (language, grammar, syntax, etc). Too often interpreters stop with these sorts of considerations, believing that they have done the necessary work to reach a correct understanding of the text. It's true that Paul penned this epistle to real people living real lives and facing real problems and challenges, but he interacted with them and their lives on the basis of what God has accomplished in His Son and the implications that flow from that fulfillment.

The premises and framework for Paul's interaction with the Corinthians – and therefore for interpreting his letter to them – are discovered in the unfolding salvation history as recorded in the Old Testament and subsequently fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Unless and until the reader adopts Paul's perspective and framework, it's impossible for him to think Paul's thoughts after him; it's impossible for him to "rightly divide" Paul's instruction to the church at Corinth. *This means that the First Corinthian epistle – as every text of Scripture – must be read in the light of the entire Bible as it constitutes an organic whole.*

- a. Again, this letter provides a unique case study of how Christ's people are to regard and interact with the various features and dynamics of their day-to-day existence as individual members of Christ and the New Covenant community. In this sense, First Corinthians picks up where the book of Acts leaves off:
 - Acts treats the subject of the Church from the standpoint of scriptural fulfillment: It is primarily concerned with the Church's nature, origin, early progress and significance in God's eternal purpose for His creation.
 - For its part, First Corinthians takes scriptural revelation further by showing how the *truth* of the Church revealed in Acts – its identity, nature, and role – is to play out in its *practical existence* in the world.

This essential relationship between Acts and First Corinthians is vitally important and cannot be overlooked if the latter is to be properly interpreted and applied. Indeed, this same relationship exists between the book of Acts and all the epistles (not simply Paul's), evident in the fact that Acts provides the historical and salvation-historical bridge between the gospels and the rest of the New Testament.

The four Gospels interact with the person and work of Jesus Christ, and thereby set the stage for His New Covenant Church as the inaugural fruit of His atoning death, resurrection and enthronement. On the other hand, the balance of the New Testament (beyond Acts) pertains to the Church as an already-existing entity. The gospels *predict* the Church and the epistles *presuppose* it; therefore, without Luke's record in Acts there would be no concrete way to bridge the chasm between prediction and realization.

- b. Acts is the premise to First Corinthians as much as are the Gospels. *But so is the entire Old Testament*: Acts records the realization in history of what the Gospels predicted as a matter of imminent fulfillment, namely the ushering in of the kingdom of God. But that prediction was itself only the Gospel writers affirming that, in Jesus Christ, God was now fulfilling all that He had promised from the beginning in all the Scriptures. And so, if proper interaction with First Corinthians depends upon reading it through the lens of Acts and the Gospels, it equally depends upon reading it through the lens of the Old Testament scriptures.

In summary, First Corinthians is eminently practical as it speaks to the various facets and challenges of the Christian life. And yet it does so by interacting with a particular ancient community of believers and their specific issues, challenges and problems; Paul didn't write his Corinthian epistles to *the* Church, but to the church *at Corinth*. Nevertheless, his instruction directed toward a particular congregation is inspired *Scripture*, and therefore speaks across time and space to every church body and individual believer. Discerning how it does so and then appropriating that communication is the challenge for Christ's Church.

- First of all, these considerations show that the contemporary reader cannot read Paul's letter to the Corinthians as if it were written to him. As obvious as this is, probably most Christians do just that. As Hays observed, our personal ownership of the Scripture as God's word *for us* leaves us automatically coming to it as if its content were written by God directly to us and for us. (So, for instance, the claiming of personal "life verses" and the use of 2 Chronicles 7:14 as the "theme verse" of the National Day of Prayer.)
- First Corinthians has great practical relevance to the Church in every place and generation, but its practical value can only be rightly discovered and utilized when the epistle is read *canonically* – that is, read in the light of the Old Testament revelation and promise of the kingdom of God, its fulfillment in Christ, and its manifestation in His Church. Christians must discern their identity and place within God's grand purpose if they are to correctly "apply" scriptural instruction: The *truth* of correct practice – as opposed to merely the *fact* of it – is the fruit only of the truth of correct understanding.

Thus First Corinthians provides an invaluable practical resource for the Church – however, not as a user's manual containing step-by-step remedies for particular personal, moral and ethical maladies (sexual immorality, lawsuits, divorce, etc.), but as a call to Christ's Church to ongoing commitment to *repentance* and *faith*. Like all of the New Testament writings (albeit in a very practical way), First Corinthians holds forth the Church's obligation to discern, nurture and conform its thinking – and by consequence, its conduct – to the truth as it is in Christ.