

Commentary on 1 Corinthians

In the chronological New Testament, this letter comes after 1 Thessalonians and Galatians. According to Acts, Paul created a Christ-community in Corinth in southern Greece around the year 50. Corinth was a major city, seaport and capital of the Roman province of Achaia, which include Athens. In Paul's word, Corinth (not Athens) was the most important city in Greece. Though there was a Jewish synagogue there, the city was almost completely Gentile, cosmopolitan [multicultural], and multi-ethnic. According to Acts, Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth on his first visit, probably from about 50 through 51. When he wrote this letter a few years later, he was in Ephesus in Asia Minor, just over two hundred miles across the Aegean from Corinth.¹

Historical Context

The historical context of the letter is Paul's relationship to the Christ-community he had founded in Corinth. Paul has been away from it for a few years –probably at least two. Now he has learned that divisions and conflicts have developed within the community. Much of the letter addresses these conflicts.²

The community was divided into factions: 1) Some say, "I belong to Paul," or "to Apolos" or "to Cephas (Peter)" or "to Christ." 2) the community was divided over spiritual gifts. 3) Division within the community between "the rich" and "the rest." The letter tells us that few were wealthy. The Christ community in Corinth was mostly made up of urban workers, many of them God-fearers from the merchant and artisan classes. Some were prosperous enough to have become Paul's patrons and benefactors. Although not from the super-wealthy class, they may have been what we call "well-to-do."³

¹ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 57.

² Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 57.

³ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 58.

This conflict surfaces in chapter 11 and is the context for what Paul writes about the meaning of the common meal that he calls the “Lord’s supper.” In the first century Christianity, the Lord’s supper was a real meal – a full meal shared in the community by the community, during which bread and wine would be celebrated as the body and blood of Christ.⁴ What we call the Eucharist was part of the common meal. They shared this meal probably at least weekly. In Corinth, the meal had ceased to be a common meal. According to chapter 11, the wealthy (who didn’t have to work) would gather early for the meal. By the time people who worked (most of the community) go to the meal, the wealthy had already eaten. They may also have served the best wine and best food to themselves before the others arrived. Such was common among the wealthy in that world. For Paul, this violated the “one body” understanding of life “in Christ.” It meant bringing the hierarchical distinctions of “this world” into the body of Christ. But these differences were not to be replicated in the community that Paul called “a new creation.” Paul describes the situation:²¹*For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.*²²*What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!* (I Cor. 11: 21-22)⁵ [Paul cares about and defend the poor members who have little]. Paul, in the context of the Lord’s Supper (11:23-26), concludes that “whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord” (11:27). In this context, eating and drinking the bread and wine “in an unworthy manner” refers to the behavior of the wealthy in perpetuating the divisions of “this world.” In Christian communities, those divisions were abolished.⁶

⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 58.

⁵ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 59.

⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 59.

Resurrection (p. 60-61).

The conclusion

Chapter 16 begins with a reference to the “collection for the saints.” Paul is raising money from his largely Gentile Christian communities for Christian Jews in Jerusalem. This collection was a major reason for Paul’s final journey to Jerusalem in the late 50s, where he was arrested and then spent the rest of his life in confinement, initially in Jerusalem, then in Caesarea, and then in Rome. ⁷

⁷ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 61.