

A Commentary on
Paul's First Letter
to the Corinthians

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By

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Edited by

Edward Hollander

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PREFACE

Throughout my lectureship in New Testament Studies as part of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, the analysis of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians has been one of the central and favourite subjects of my study. I wrote several articles on individual passages from this NT letter, as well as a full commentary on the text of 1 Corinthians in Dutch. After my retirement in 2012, I decided to bundle a number of these articles in a single volume entitled *Tradition and Rhetoric in Paul's Correspondence with the Corinthians*, which was published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2020.

It also occurred to me that it would be a good idea to make an English translation of my commentary on 1 Corinthians. This has, however, become much more than a simple translation, it is in fact a new and fully elaborated version of my Dutch commentary (*1 Korintiërs I-III. Een praktische bijbelverklaring*), published between 1996 and 2007 by the Dutch publishing house Kok of Kampen. I am fully aware that there are quite a number of commentaries on 1 Corinthians, but this one does differ from them in some respects. First, it contains a new, readable and modern functional equivalent or communicative translation of the Greek text, that is, a translation that attempts to elucidate the writer's intentions for a new and modern audience, and one that incorporates the latest results of translation studies. Second, it offers a scholarly but pleasant to read exegetical/philological commentary on the text in the light of the historical and cultural environment in which it was written, avoiding difficult theological jargon as much as possible. I think I can say, in all modesty, that this approach has produced a number of new and surprising results, but I will leave that to the readers of this commentary to judge for themselves.

I would like to thank Mr. Arjen van Trigt, publisher of KokBoekencentrum (Utrecht, The Netherlands) for permission to make an English version of my Dutch commentary on 1 Corinthians.

I feel privileged to have collaborated in 2013 with Professor Dr Matthijs de Jong (head of the translation department of the Netherlands Bible Society) on a new Dutch translation of 1 Corinthians as part of “The Bible in Plain Language” (*Bijbel in Gewone Taal*), published by the Netherlands Bible Society in 2014. I am grateful to him for his indispensable help and his many apposite suggestions concerning the interpretation of a number of difficult passages in this letter to the Corinthians.

Thanks are also due to Mrs. Peggy Birch (Norfolk, United Kingdom) who was so kind to edit and proofread the entire text. If there are still some imperfections, I will take the blame for them.

My thanks also go to the editors and staff members at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their willingness to publish this volume and for all their help in the preparation of the manuscript.

The Author

In 2021 my father passed away unexpectedly, just after finishing the writing of this last book. On behalf of my mother, brother and sister, I would like to express my gratitude to Commissioning Editor Adam Rummens of Cambridge Scholars for making it possible to continue with publishing this book, to Professor Dr Matthijs de Jong and Professor Dr Martin de Boer for proofreading my father's manuscript and all the help in the final editing of this book.

The feeling that this last book of my father will finally be published is an occasion for inexpressible gratitude and joy. We hope many will benefit from it.

Edward Hollander

INTRODUCTION

The author of the letter

The apostle Paul is mentioned in the prescript of the letter as its author, and there does not seem to be any reason to doubt this.¹ It means that, together with Romans, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon, the first letter to the Corinthians belongs to the seven authentic Pauline letters in the New Testament.

By the time Paul wrote the letter, he had lived a rather eventful and turbulent life. A diaspora Jew from Tarsus and a member of the “party” of the Pharisees, a group of Jews known for their respect for and compliance with the Jewish law,² he became one of the fiercest opponents of the followers of Jesus Christ. He violently persecuted the (Jewish) members of this “Jesus movement” and it could even be said he tried to “destroy” it.³ But around the year 35, while on his way to Damascus, he “saw” Jesus Christ; that is, the Lord “appeared” to him, because God decided to reveal his Son to him and commanded him to preach the Gospel among the Gentiles.⁴ We do not know exactly what happened that day, because Paul himself does not give more details and the story told in Acts 9:1-19a⁵ can hardly be considered to be historically reliable, but whatever it was, this “encounter” with Jesus Christ had far-reaching consequences. Paul no longer persecuted Christians; instead he became not only a follower of Jesus Christ, but also a dedicated apostle of the Lord.

After wandering in Arabia, Syria and Cilicia and spending a short time in Jerusalem, he became a prominent member of the Christian community in the city of Antioch, a “mixed” community of Jewish and non-Jewish Christians, where he became good friends with Barnabas, the leader of the local community.⁶ However, a theological argument between Paul and

¹ On Sosthenes as “co-author,” see the commentary on 1 Cor 1:1.

² See Gal 1:13-14, Phil 3:5, and cf. Acts 23:6.

³ See, e.g., 1 Cor 15:9, Gal 1:13, Phil 3:6, and cf. Acts 8:3, and 9:1.

⁴ See 1Cor 9:1, 15:8, and Gal 1:15-16.

⁵ Cf. Acts 22:3-16, and 26:9-18.

⁶ See Gal 1:17-24, and cf. Acts 11:25-26.

Barnabas about the role of the Jewish law led to an almost complete estrangement between them.⁷ In Paul's view, Christianity was "a new way" different to both Judaism and paganism, and as such, neither Jewish nor non-Jewish believers were obliged to observe the tenets of the Jewish law, the Thora, including circumcision, observance of the Sabbath, and all manner of dietary laws. Instead, all Christians had to observe a "new" law, viz., the law of Christ, centred on love for one another.⁸ Barnabas, and above all Peter and James, the leaders of the Christian community in Jerusalem, felt somewhat differently, but for Paul it was crystal clear. He left the community of Antioch and travelled to many places in Asia, Macedonia and Greece to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. From that time on, and without a local Christian community to support him, he was nevertheless very successful and became the founder of a number of Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire.

Tragically, the fact that he had once been a fanatical persecutor of the "Jesus movement" and that after his conversion or call he became a missionary with a number of conflicting opinions, put him in a rather isolated position. Many Jewish Christians considered him too "liberal", whereas many non-Jewish Christians considered him too "Jewish". As a consequence, he had to defend himself more than once against people who denied his apostleship. Despite this, there were also many Christians like his favourite "son in Christ", Timothy, who supported him or even became his co-workers in proclaiming the Gospel.

Paul visited the city of Corinth for the first time in or around the year 50, and succeeded in founding a small Christian community there. According to Acts 18:1-18, he stayed there for eighteen months. It was in the year 55, at the end of a two-year stay in Ephesus, that he wrote 1 Corinthians.⁹ The letter was probably brought to the community in Corinth by Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus, who are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:17.

The addressees of the letter

Thanks to its favourable location between the Peloponnese and mainland Greece, Corinth was a thriving and prosperous city in ancient times. However, when the city took arms against the Romans in the second

⁷ See Gal 2:11-14. In Acts 15:36-40, this quarrel is wrongly presented as a personal fight between Paul and Barnabas.

⁸ Gal 6:2.

⁹ See 1 Cor 16:8, and cf. Acts 19.

century BCE, its revolt resulted in complete disaster, and Corinth was overrun and destroyed by the Romans in the year 146 BCE. It remained a desolate place for more than a century, until Julius Caesar decided to found a Roman colony at the place which had once been the prosperous city of Corinth in the year 44 BCE. A second period of prosperity dawned for Corinth, and many freedmen and freedwomen – people who had been slaves but had been freed by their masters – came from Rome and settled in this new colony, mingling with people from Greece. People from Egypt, Asia and elsewhere also settled in Corinth, and by the first century CE, Corinth was once again an important city, and had become the capital of the Roman province of Achaia.

Although the Romans were the *political* leaders throughout the entire Roman Empire, including Greece, the lives of its inhabitants were greatly influenced by a kind of “unified *culture*”, namely that of Hellenism. Some time after the conquests of Alexander the Great (died 323 BCE), Hellenistic Greek had been the *lingua franca*, the language spoken by almost all inhabitants of the Roman Empire as either their mother tongue or as a second language. Many originally Greek ideas and concepts also became popular, in particular those of philosophical traditions such as Stoicism and Cynicism, which focused primarily on the practice of daily life. In addition to this, the “old” Greek and Roman religions, as well as several mystery cults, also had many followers.

When Paul visited the city of Corinth in or around the year 50, he first looked for somewhere to rent; a place where he could live and earn his keep as a leather worker. He probably spoke about Jesus Christ with everybody he met, and he undoubtedly succeeded in persuading a number of people to become followers of the Lord. By the time he left the city in the year 51 or 52, a small Christian community had been formed thanks to his efforts. All (or almost all) these Christians were non-Jews by birth, and most of them were slaves or belonged to the lower classes of Corinthian society; only a few were powerful and of noble birth.¹⁰ Somewhat later, other missionaries, including Apollos, visited Corinth, and membership of the Christian community increased, so it probably numbered a few hundred people by the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. They would have come together weekly to celebrate their faith in one of the several “house churches” in the city.

¹⁰ See 1 Cor 1:26, and 12:2.

The reason for writing the letter

Thanks to the efforts of other missionaries, the Christian community had continued to grow after Paul left Corinth, but the community was not a particularly tranquil group, to say the least. Problems and differences of opinion arose among them, not so much about the content of the Gospel, but rather about the practice of leading a truly Christian life. When Paul heard about this, he decided to send them a letter. Unfortunately, this letter has been lost, but we know from 1 Corinthians 5:9 that it was sent by Paul to the Corinthians in the hopes of settling these ethical issues. In reaction to this letter, the Corinthians wrote a letter to Paul.¹¹ Despite the common opinion of most scholars, their letter was not a friendly response to Paul's earlier letter, nor did it simply contain a number of questions which they wanted him to answer. On the contrary, it was a critical response and a stern rejection of all that Paul had written to them. They made it perfectly clear that they did not agree with Paul about a number of important issues. It is likely that this letter was not written on behalf of the entire Christian community in Corinth, but was drafted by some of the more influential and eminent members of the community. In any case, Paul found it appropriate to answer this letter point by point. He sometimes introduces a particular issue with the word "About",¹² but elsewhere in his letter he also deals with issues, or uses particular vocabulary, that originate in that letter from the Corinthian Christians.

Paul did not reply immediately when he received this critical letter from the Corinthians. Instead, he asked his closest co-worker, Timothy, to visit the Christian community in Corinth.¹³ No sooner was Timothy on his way than some "members of Chloe's household" from Corinth came to Paul in Ephesus and told him about the many quarrels between, and abuses of, a number of Corinthian Christians.¹⁴ They told him about the "factions" or "parties" within the Corinthian community and about the hostility of some Corinthians towards Paul. Apparently, there was division among the Corinthians over Christian leaders like Cephas (Peter), Apollos and Paul. Some of the Corinthians had been deeply impressed by Apollos, who had preached the Gospel in Corinth after Paul had left the city; they had been struck by his rhetorical skills and his performance in general. As a

¹¹ See 1 Cor 7:1, "Now for the matters you wrote about."

¹² See 1 Cor 7:1, 25, 8:1, 12:1, 16:1, and 12.

¹³ See 1 Cor 4:17.

¹⁴ See 1 Cor 1:11.

consequence, they began to question Paul's message, authority and performance.

This oral report by the visitors from Corinth seems to have been the trigger for the writing of 1 Corinthians. Paul obviously decided not to wait for Timothy's return to Ephesus to hear his account of the situation in Corinth; instead, he sent his letter straight away to the Corinthian community, assuming that it would probably arrive before Timothy reached the city.¹⁵ In the letter, Paul deals with the issues brought up by "members of Chloe's household", as well as with the issues raised by the Corinthian Christians in their letter. As has been mentioned, this "official" letter from the Corinthians may have been written by leading Corinthian Christians who belonged to the higher classes of society, whereas the "members of Chloe's household" were probably slaves or freedmen who belonged to the lower classes. These two groups of Corinthians held differing opinions: the former was critical of Paul and wanted to lead a life of freedom, whereas the latter was more prepared to listen to Paul and to lead a life according to his advice.

Content and structure of the letter

One of the most striking themes in 1 Corinthians is Paul's defence against the attacks of those Corinthian Christians who called into question his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ. He had been told that there were divisions within the Corinthian community. The Corinthian Christians had heard of other apostles, Peter for example, who had known Jesus personally and become one of the leaders of the Christian community in Jerusalem. They had also met Apollos, another missionary whose ministry proved very attractive to a number of local Christians. As a consequence, some Corinthians began to question Paul's authority as an apostle. In their eyes, Apollos in particular was a far better teacher than Paul; the latter did not excel in knowledge and eloquence and had led a miserable life of suffering and oppression which they found disproportionate and not befitting an apostle of the Lord. In chapters 1-4 in particular, Paul tries to restore his authority by telling the Corinthians that human or worldly wisdom or knowledge does not count, that no one except God himself may pass judgment on any missionary, and that he voluntarily accepts his life of suffering and misery.

¹⁵ See 1 Cor 16:10-11.

The combination of the accounts of the “members of Chloe’s household” and the letter from the Corinthians made Paul realise that a number of Corinthian Christians held opinions that were very different to his own views on “the new way” of the Christian faith. Since their conversion, these Christians had experienced a feeling of “power”, “liberty”, or “freedom”, and felt they could do anything they wanted.¹⁶ So they thought they could indulge in all forms of sexual immorality (1 Cor 5-6), or eat food that had been sacrificed to idols, even when to do so weighed heavily on the conscience of their fellow Christians (1 Cor 8 and 10). There were also people whose disdain for all earthly or worldly matters led to complete asceticism: they preferred not to marry or to divorce if they were already married (1 Cor 7). Moreover, there was complete chaos at the weekly meetings of the congregation, with women who prayed and prophesied bareheaded and people who did not want to wait for their fellow Christians at the common meals, but ate as much and as quickly as they could (1 Cor 11). The chaos was made even worse by their enthusiasm for the spiritual gift of “speaking in tongues”, leading to a cacophony of loud sounds and noises which made the meetings a complete catastrophe (1 Cor 12 and 14). Finally, some Christians even ridiculed the idea that dead Christians would be raised to life at the end of time and would receive a human body (1 Cor 15).

In his letter, Paul tries to convince these Corinthian Christians that, overall, their ideas and their behaviour are the opposite of what true Christians are expected to think and do. Sometimes, he panders to their feelings and tries to reach a compromise, but at other times he totally rejects their ideas and their way of living. In chapters 9 and 13, he makes it clear that the freedom of an individual should not be detrimental to the feelings and sensitivities of their fellow Christians and that, for Christians, the love of one another is more important than anything else. What really matters is the edification of all the members of the Christian community.

In writing this letter, Paul is attempting to set all Corinthian Christians back on the right track, and to make peace with those Corinthians who were calling his apostleship into question. This attempt was not completely successful, however, and it becomes clear in 2 Corinthians that Paul was not treated respectfully when he visited Corinth a second time; on the contrary, he was deeply insulted and had to leave quickly.¹⁷ Somewhat later, after he had written a letter “in tears”, the conflict

¹⁶ See 1 Cor 6:12, and 10:23.

¹⁷ See 2 Cor 2:5, and 7:12.

between Paul and his detractors among the Corinthians was more or less resolved, although the relationship between the apostle and the Christian community in Corinth remained rather strained.

For a global division of the letter into eight parts or sections, see the “Table of Contents”.

The approach of this commentary

This commentary on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians seeks to explain what Paul was trying to communicate to the first readers of the letter, a group of Christians living in the Greek city of Corinth in the middle of the first century CE. In order to achieve this goal, a thorough and detailed analysis of the text is necessary, together with a critical eye on the structure of the letter as a whole. Knowledge and understanding of the Graeco-Roman, Hellenistic world, the world in which Paul and the Corinthians lived and worked, is therefore a prerequisite condition. Paul was a man of his time, and his world was that of (Jewish) Hellenism. His readers in Corinth were almost all of pagan birth, and lived in an economic, cultural and religious Hellenistic centre. Paul and his readers were undoubtedly acquainted with all kinds of Hellenistic concepts and traditions.

All this makes it necessary to consult the primary sources of the time, that is, literary documents written in Graeco-Roman times, in order to understand the ideas and concepts of Paul and his readers in Corinth. It is only by consulting other pagan, Jewish and early-Christian writings that we are able to discover what the world in which Paul and his readers lived looked like and understand the ideas and concepts that Paul and his readers shared with their contemporaries, as well as the ways in which their ideas differed from the common Hellenistic ideas of the time. It is clear, for instance, that both Paul and his readers in Corinth were deeply influenced by popular philosophical schools such as Stoicism and Cynicism. Of course, Paul had been inspired by his “encounter” with Jesus Christ, when he was called to be an apostle and proclaim the Gospel, but he was and remained someone who lived in a Hellenistic world, and who, after his conversion or call, tried to integrate pagan and Jewish ideas and concepts into a new way of life, namely, that of a believer in Christ. Some pagan and Jewish concepts he rejected, but many other Hellenistic ideas were welcomed by him and were integrated into his views on the Christian faith, consciously or unconsciously. Finally, as a Jew by birth, Paul was

quite familiar with the OT/LXX, and he also shared a number of ideas with people who had become Christians before him.

It is not enough to trace the concepts and ideas Paul shared with his contemporaries in order to elucidate Paul's way of communicating his ideas to the Corinthian Christians; it is also necessary to discover the ways in which he used and adapted them. Paul's vocabulary, that is, the words and expressions he used, is also subjected to a thorough analysis here, so many references to OT/LXX passages, as well as to a number of pagan, Jewish and early-Christian writings, are given in this commentary, with the sole aim of explaining what Paul was trying to communicate to the addressees in Corinth and in what way. Needless to say, this approach has led to many new and original interpretations of a number of passages in 1 Corinthians, which I consider to be correct, or at least worthy of serious consideration.

Despite this analysis, however, this is not a commentary that is difficult to read or to use. I have attempted to keep the text of the commentary (and the translation)¹⁸ as readable as possible, and Greek and Latin words are presented only when they may contribute to the understanding of a particular passage or sentence and are always accompanied by an English translation for the reader's convenience. For the same reason, namely, to provide the reader with a commentary that is pleasant to read, discussions with other interpreters and NT scholars are omitted. That does not mean, of course, that I have not consulted their commentaries, monographs and articles on parts of 1 Corinthians – quite the contrary! Again for the reader's convenience, a “short list of commentaries” has been added at the end of this volume so that the reader will be able to come across other (or the same!) interpretations of particular passages in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.

The commentary on each major part of the letter begins with an introduction, which gives an overview of the content and the literary structure. All eight parts are subdivided into a number of smaller sections, each of which has the same tripartite structure: a translation, a short introduction, and finally, a full commentary of the passage in question.

¹⁸ See also the next section “A note on the translation.”

A note on the translation

In this commentary, all translations of ancient sources, including those of the text of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, are "functional equivalent" or "communicative" translations in idiomatic English. They are intentionally not literal word for word translations, for such translations are (almost) always incomprehensible to modern readers. It was also my aim to provide the readers of this commentary not only with an interpretation of the Greek text, but also with a pleasant to read translation of the text of 1 Corinthians that is in itself as clear and understandable as possible and serves to reflect my interpretation. Needless to say, in working on the translation of 1 Corinthians (and other biblical and ancient texts), I have consulted many modern Bible translations, the NEB and the NRSV in particular, and a number of modern translations of other ancient texts, for I am fully aware that I am not the first to translate these texts. However, my primary aim has always been to comply with the requirements I myself lay down for a modern, clear and communicative translation. In other words, the translations and the explanations are complementary to each other, and I hope that both will help the reader to understand what Paul meant to say when he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians.

For the convenience of those readers who are acquainted with more literal Bible translations, or who for one reason or another want to know what a Bible passage literally says, I have often included the literal wording in the commentary sections, mostly between brackets.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

LXX	Septuagint
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
REB	Revised English Bible

PART ONE

PAUL'S ATTACK ON APOLLOS' ADHERENTS IN CORINTH: 1:1-4:21

Immediately after the usual salutation and thanksgiving, we find a long passage in which Paul defends himself against a number of Corinthian Christians who do not regard him as a genuine apostle. There was obviously division within the community over Christian leaders like Cephas (Peter), Apollos and Paul. Apollos, who had worked as a Gospel preacher in Corinth after Paul left the city, had in particular made a lasting impression on many Corinthian Christians. They were impressed by his rhetorical skills and his performance in general, which fostered a sense of freedom, power and complacency among them, as a result of which they started to disdain other people in the community. They felt themselves to be redeemed, liberated, saved, and possessing the gifts of the Holy Spirit in abundance, they considered themselves to be "wise." As a consequence, they began to question Paul's message, authority and performance. They felt that they were "already there," whereas they saw Paul worrying in his life. According to them, Paul had failed to draw the right conclusions from the consequences of his conversion to Christianity: he gave them the impression of being a rather "poor" man as compared to other Gospel missionaries.

Paul defends himself against these attacks by pointing out to the Corinthians that God's salvation plan centres around "Jesus Christ *crucified*," and that although humiliation, suffering and oppression are considered signs of weakness or foolishness among humans, they are signs of wisdom and power in the eyes of God. This therefore explains Paul's own life, which is characterised by persecutions and misery; oppression and misery are part of the daily life of Christians living at the end of times. As an apostle, Paul worries "for Christ's sake," about the need to "save" as many people as possible. Moreover, all Gospel preachers, including Apollos and Paul himself, are just the servants of God (or Jesus Christ); they are all equal, one is not more important than another. And finally, people should not judge

missionaries who proclaim the Gospel on behalf of God; it is God, and he alone, who will judge the missionaries at the end of time. In short: in chapters 1-4, Paul urges his readers in Corinth not to be divided, not to aggrandise a particular Gospel preacher and disdain another, but rather to imitate him and to live a life characterised by self-sacrifice and service to others. In this context, he disqualifies human “knowledge” (γνῶσις), a favourite term within the Corinthian community and regarded by some Corinthian Christians as one of the greatest gifts of the Holy Spirit. He does so by quoting a couple of OT/LXX passages in which “wisdom” (σοφία) is explicitly denounced at crucial stages in the argument in an attempt to silence the supporters of Apollos.¹

Salutation: 1:1-3

(1) Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes:

(2) To the community of God in Corinth, to those who are sanctified through their connection with Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who invoke the name of our Lord Jesus Christ wherever they may be, their Lord as well as ours.

(3) Grace and peace to you, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This threefold salutation follows the traditional pattern of the NT letters. First, we find the name(s) of the author(s) of the letter (v. 1); next, the addressees are mentioned (v. 2); and finally, there is the traditional greeting or benediction (v. 3).

Although the letter mentions two senders, it is perfectly clear that it is Paul who is the author of the letter. His name is mentioned first, and in ancient times it was not customary to put one’s name last out of politeness or modesty. Moreover, he uses the first person singular throughout the letter, as in verse 4: “I give constant thanks to my God.”

In verse 1, Paul calls himself an “apostle” (ἀπόστολος), that is—literally—a “sent one,” an “envoy.” The term refers to someone who is sent by God or

¹ Since “wisdom” (σοφία) and “knowledge” (γνῶσις) are broadly synonymous in many OT/LXX writings (see, e.g., Prov 2:6, 30:3, Eccles 1:16-18, 2:21, 26, 9:10, Isa 11:2, Sir 21:18, *4 Macc.* 1:16) and since “knowledge” (γνῶσις) is not used in a pejorative sense in OT/LXX, Paul resorts to the term “wisdom” (σοφία) instead of the term “knowledge” (γνῶσις) in this part of the letter.

Jesus Christ to proclaim the Gospel. Paul very often calls himself an apostle in his letters.² This is probably because there were many people who denied him his apostleship. Next, Paul emphasises that he is an apostle “by the will of God,”³ and that it was God himself who “called” him to become an apostle. Just as in Romans 1:1, he wants his readers to realise that his apostleship is not a human matter, not a personal ambition for instance, but goes back to an order from God, received by the grace of God, as he writes elsewhere in his letters.⁴

Unfortunately, we know almost nothing about Sosthenes, the “brother” who is mentioned as the other sender of the letter. He is not mentioned in Paul's other letters, not even in 2 Corinthians. If he is to be identified with Sosthenes the official or president of the synagogue in Corinth mentioned in Acts 18:17, it would mean that he has become a Christian, and is now with Paul in Ephesus. Of course, none of this is improbable, but by mentioning Sosthenes as co-writer, Paul would be pointing out that the contents of the letter had his complete approval.

The letter is addressed to the Christian community in Corinth. The formulation “the community *of God*” is rather distinctive. In the salutations of the NT letters, it recurs only in 2 Corinthians. Paul uses it another four times in 1 Corinthians (see 10:32, 11:16, 22, and 15:9).⁵ He wants to underline that the Christian community in Corinth is not only a community in the usual sense, but a community that belongs to God. Christians are people who are “sanctified,” that is, separated from the profane world and dedicated to God “through their connection with Christ Jesus.” They are “called” (that is, called and elected by God) to be “saints,”⁶ not in the ethical sense of the word, but in an eschatological sense; living in the end of times they belong to the new people of God.

With the phrase “together with all those who invoke the name of our Lord Jesus Christ wherever they may be” Paul does not want to suggest that the letter is addressed to Christians all over the world. Instead, the phrase is meant to stress that the Corinthian Christians are nothing else but a part of

² See Rom 1:1, 11:13, 1 Cor 9:1-2, 15:9, 2 Cor 1:1, 12:12, Gal 1:1, and 1 Thess 2:6; cf. also 1 Cor 1:17.

³ Cf. 2 Cor 1:1, and see further Eph 1:1, Col 1:1, and 2 Tim 1:1.

⁴ Cf. 1 Cor 15:9-10, and Gal 1:15-16.

⁵ Cf. Acts 20:28, Gal 1:13, 1 Thess 2:14, 2 Thess 1:4, and 1 Tim 3:5, 15.

⁶ Cf. Rom 1:7.

the one Christian Church scattered all over the world.⁷ Paul describes the Christians here as people “who invoke the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This formulation has been derived from the OT (“to invoke the name of the Lord/God”),⁸ but the name of “God” has been replaced by the name of “Jesus Christ.”⁹ Since the formulation is rather stereotypical, it is not very likely that Paul refers to a form of literal invocation, at the Christian gatherings for instance; it is rather a general description of people who “believe in and serve Jesus Christ.” The words “wherever they may be” (lit. “in every place”) are meant to emphasise the universal character of the Christian Church.¹⁰ The same is true of the phrase “their Lord as well as ours.”¹¹ Christians all over the world serve the same Lord and belong to one and the same worldwide, like-minded community. In short: in the salutation of the letter, Paul wants his readers in Corinth to realise that they are part of the one and universal community of people who are elected by God.

Finally, we find the usual greetings in verse 3. Being an apostle of the Lord, Paul can and may transmit “grace and peace,” that is, the salvation which will come to the elect; to the Christians in Corinth. They may be sure that they will inherit salvation and eternal life at the end of times. These greetings seem to hark back to Jewish blessing formulas: see, for instance, *1 Enoch* 5:7, “There will be light, grace and peace for the elect, and they will inherit the earth,” and *2 Baruch* 78:2, “Thus says Baruch ... to his brothers who have been deported in captivity: ‘grace and peace be with you.’” In the greetings of the NT letters, the Christian twist is obvious: “grace” and “peace” are bestowed not only by God but also by “the Lord Jesus Christ.” Once again the name of Jesus Christ is mentioned in the salutation; without any doubt, he is the chief character in the entire passage 1 Corinthians 1:1-9.

Thanksgiving: 1:4-9

(4) I give constant thanks to my God for you, because of the grace of God that has been given to you through your connection with Christ Jesus.

⁷ Cf. also 1 Cor 4:17, 7:17, 11:16, 14:33b, and 36.

⁸ See, e.g., Gen 4:26, Ps 105:1 (104:1), Joel 2:32, Zeph 3:9, and Zech 13:9.

⁹ Cf. Acts 9:14, 21.

¹⁰ Cf. 2 Cor 2:14, 1 Thess 1:8, 1 Tim 2:8, and cf. also Mal 1:11.

¹¹ For this formulation, cf. Rom 1:12 (“your faith as well as mine”), 16:13 (“his mother as well as mine”), and Dio Chrysostom, *Orat.* 38.9.

(5) For through this connection you have been enriched in every respect, that is, in every kind of speech and knowledge. (6) For the testimony about Christ has been firmly anchored in your community, (7) so you will not lack for any spiritual gift as you wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. (8) He will strengthen you to the end, so that you will be blameless on the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (9) You can trust God: it is he who has called you to form a close community of believers in his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

After the threefold salutation, we find the traditional thanksgiving. In such a passage, the author of the letter attempts to win over his readers and establish or deepen his relationship with them. He is hoping that, as a result, they will receive his opinions and advice very favourably. Paul thanks God that the Corinthian Christians have received “the grace of God” and that they do not lack in any spiritual gift, such as “inspired speaking” and “knowledge” (vv. 4-7a). They may be sure that Jesus Christ will be with them until the Day of Judgment and that God will keep his promise (vv. 7b-9).

First of all, Paul tells his readers in Corinth that he recalls them in his prayers,¹² and thanks God for the Christian community in Corinth. But the reason he is thankful to God is not, as in other letters, something general like their strong faith, hope or love for one another. This time, Paul points explicitly to “the grace of God” they received when they came to believe in Jesus Christ. With the term “grace,” Paul refers above all to their spiritual gifts, which they possess because they have accepted the Gospel of Jesus Christ. At that time they became “rich” people through their connection with Jesus.¹³ They have been “enriched in every respect,” but particularly “in every kind of speech and knowledge.” When he refers to “every kind of speech,” Paul does not intend to imply that the Corinthians are masters of rhetoric, but rather that, as teachers, prophets and speakers in tongues, they are uniquely capable of using all kinds of words, phrases and messages whispered to them by the Holy Spirit (see esp. chs. 12-14). The Corinthian Christians also possess the gift of “knowledge” (γνῶσις), that is, the gift of knowing God; of knowing his plan of salvation and the divine secrets of the Christian faith. They know what the Christian faith is all about and they know (or think they know) how people should behave as real Christians. They feel themselves to be “free” and “newborn” human beings, as it were, living “in high spirits,” and with the greatest disdain for all earthly and

¹² Cf. Rom 1:8-10, Phil 1:3-4, and 1 Thess 1:2.

¹³ Cf. 2 Cor 8:7-9.

worldly matters. Their lives centre around “knowledge” or “wisdom” (σοφία), related terms, both of which recur rather often in this letter.¹⁴

These spiritual gifts—that of “speech” and that of “knowledge”—are closely related, and a number of Corinthian Christians have been boasting of having these very gifts, as will be clear later on in this letter. And although Paul cannot deny that these gifts are godly gifts, he will go on to warn his readers that these gifts may give rise to all kinds of abuses which are at odds with a truly Christian life. For him, some things are much more important than the gifts of speech and knowledge.

Nevertheless, Paul praises the Corinthian Christians in this part of the letter, saying that they are “rich” people who “do not lack for any spiritual gift,” since “the testimony about Christ,”¹⁵ that is, the Gospel about Jesus Christ, has been firmly established in the Christian community in Corinth. The Corinthian Christians are not doubters, but faithful believers (vv. 6-7a). The apostle will return to the role of the spiritual gifts in chapters 12-14.

The Corinthians will have all these gifts until the time that Jesus Christ will be “revealed,” that is, will return in glory, a moment they look forward to eagerly, as do all Christians (v. 7b).¹⁶ Then, at the end of times, the judgment of God will take place, but the Christians do not need to be afraid: Jesus Christ¹⁷ will “strengthen them to the end.” He will stand with them, so that they will not lose their faith but will be found “blameless” before God on the Day of Judgment, on “the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ”¹⁸ (v. 8).

Paul ends the salutation with the statement that his readers can have confidence in God, for he is reliable and trustworthy (πιστός), a term also connected elsewhere with God’s judgment.¹⁹ Moreover, it is God himself who has called the Christians in Corinth “to form a close community of believers in his Son Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 9). In other words, they are called into a fellowship of believers based on their connection with God’s

¹⁴ See further 1:17, 19-22, 24, 30, 2:1, 4-7, 13, 3:19, 8:1, 7, 10-11, 12:8, 13:2, 8, 14:6; cf. also 1:25-27, 2:8, 11, 14, 16, 3:10, 18-20, 4:19, 6:5, 8:2-3, 13:9, 12, and 14:7, 9.

¹⁵ Cf. 2 Tim 1:8.

¹⁶ Cf. Rom 8:19-30, and Phil 3:20.

¹⁷ Jesus Christ is probably the subject in v. 8; cf. Phil 3:21, and 1 Thess 3:13.

¹⁸ This formulation goes back to the OT phrase “the Day of the Lord” (see, e.g., Amos 5:18, and Joel 2:31); in the OT, “the Lord” refers to God, of course, whereas here “the Lord” is Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Cor 1:14, Phil 1:6, 10, and 2:16).

¹⁹ See, e.g., Deut 32:4, and *Pss. Sol.* 17:10.

Son Jesus Christ.²⁰ In this letter, Paul reminds his readers in Corinth again and again that they are called by God to be a close-knit community—a group of associates bound together by their faith in Jesus Christ—and as such, they should take care of each other.

Followers of no one else but Jesus Christ: 1:10-17

(10) I appeal to all of you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: do not disagree with one another; let there be no divisions among you, but be perfectly united in thought and mind. (11) For, my brothers and sisters, members of Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. (12) What I mean is this: each of you supports a different preacher, that is, one says, "I am a supporter of Paul," another, "I am a supporter of Apollos," another, "I am a supporter of Cephas," and yet another, "I am a supporter of Christ." (13) Has Christ then been split into multiple people? Was it Paul who was crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul? (14) No; I am thankful to God that I did not baptise any of you except Crispus and Gaius, (15) so no one can say that you were baptised in my name. (16) But wait—I forgot, I also baptised Stephanas and his household, but beyond that, I do not remember having baptised anyone else. (17) For Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the Gospel, and that not with words of wisdom, lest the message of the cross of Christ be no more than empty talk.

Immediately after the salutation, Paul first appeals to his readers in Corinth to be united (v. 10). He has been told by some people from Corinth who visited him in Ephesus that there is division in the Christian community of Corinth: there are several "factions" or "parties" whose members are inspired by different preachers or leaders (vv. 11-12). Paul disagrees: all Christians should have only one "master" or "inspirer," namely Jesus Christ. It is he who has been crucified for them, it is in his name they have been baptised. Moreover, no particular, magical bond exists between those who are baptised and the one who baptises (v. 13). Anyway, Paul is happy that he has baptised only a few people in Corinth, so that there is no basis for the existence of a "Paul party" (vv. 14-16). Besides, Paul has not been called by Jesus Christ to baptise, but to preach the Gospel (v. 17a). At the end of

²⁰ The term *κοινωνία*, "fellowship" or "partnership," followed by a genitive means "sharing with one or more individuals who have a common interest in something or someone" rather than "participation in something or someone." Thus, Paul does not refer to a fellowship of the Corinthians with Christ (through the Holy Spirit, for instance), an interpretation supported by almost all commentators, but to a community of Christian believers established on their faith in Jesus Christ. On Paul's use of the term *κοινωνία*, see further at 10:14-22.

this paragraph Paul specifies the typical contents of the Gospel: it is not a message characterised by (human) wisdom, but a (divine) message of “the cross of Christ” (v. 17b). This last phrase marks the transition to the section verses 18-31.

Paul’s exhortation to be united, “not to disagree with one another,” is enforced by the words “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”²¹ Paul is, as it were, begging his readers to be like-minded. By the term ἀδελφοί, which is translated both here and elsewhere in the letter as “brothers and sisters,” Paul is probably referring to all Christians in Corinth, men as well as women. Also, linguistically, the (masculine) plural form does not exclude a “mixed” group of men and women. The same phenomenon can be found in many other languages, for instance: in Spanish, *padre* means “father” and *madre* means “mother,” but *padres* means “father and mother.” Likewise, *hermano* means “brother” and *hermana* means “sister,” but *hermanos* means “brothers” (if there are no sisters) as well as “brother(s) and sister(s).”²²

Thus, Paul urges his readers to be united or, literally, “to speak the same,” (τὸ αὐτὸ λέγειν), the Greek idiom for “agreeing with one another,” and not only in words.²³ And being united excludes any form of division.²⁴ At the end of verse 10, Paul once again exhorts his readers to be “perfectly united in thought and mind”; there should be no division among the members of the community caused by following certain “masters,” “missionaries,” or “leaders.”²⁵ Paul does not refer to any doctrinal divisions among the Corinthian Christians, but rather to their lack of unity when it comes to the question of which preacher or leader is the best and most capable mediator to transmit the message of God.

Paul mentions this division within the Christian community in Corinth because he has been informed about it by some “members of Chloe’s household” (v. 11). Since Paul does not say anything more about these people or about Chloe, we may conclude that they were well-known to the Corinthians. They were probably slaves or other members of Chloe’s household in Corinth who had been sent to Paul in Ephesus by Chloe, a

²¹ Cf. Rom 15:30, and 2 Cor 10:1.

²² Cf. also *Geschwister* in German, which means “brother(s) and sister(s).”

²³ Cf., e.g., Josephus, *A.J.* 18.378.

²⁴ Cf. also 11:18-22, and 12:25.

²⁵ For more or less similar phrases, cf. Rev 17:13, 17, Josephus, *A.J.* 7.60, Ign. *Magn.* 7:1, and Plutarch, *Cam.* 40.2 (*Vit. par.* 150CD).

well-to-do woman, in order to inform him about the troubles in the Corinthian community.²⁶

The controversies within the Christian community had to do with the existence of a number of different factions or parties. Paul states that *every* Christian in Corinth is a follower or a devotee of a different leader or preacher, which is without any doubt somewhat exaggerated. Nevertheless, there were clearly groups of Christians who centred around different leaders. Paul mentions four of them: “supporters of Paul,” “supporters of Apollos,” “supporters of Cephas,” and “supporters of Christ”²⁷ (v. 12).²⁸ According to Paul, these Corinthians do not realise that the apostles and other preachers are no more than servants of God, commissioned by God to preach the Gospel and to teach Christians, but that it is Jesus Christ who is the only Saviour; the only real leader. In this context, Paul feels that perhaps some of the Christians in Corinth have trouble with him and prefer more appealing missionaries like Apollos and Cephas, or prefer to turn directly to Jesus Christ.

As to the four “leaders” mentioned by Paul in verse 12, he refers first of all to himself. That there was a group of Christians in Corinth who were followers of Paul is not surprising; he was the founder of the Christian community there, and had lived for a considerable period in the city.²⁹

Nor is it surprising that Apollos is mentioned by Paul as another “leader” for a number of Corinthian Christians. We know from Acts 18:24-19:1 that a certain Apollos, a Jew who had become a Christian, had lived in Corinth for a while. If the author of Acts has provided historically reliable information it may be that this Apollos is the same person as the one mentioned here by Paul. According to the author of Acts, Apollos came from the important city of Alexandria and was “an eloquent man, competent in the use of the Scriptures.” If all of this is true, Apollos must have played an important role within the Christian community in Corinth. From the following chapters, it becomes clear that Paul realises that it is his colleague

²⁶ It is not very likely that they were the same people as those mentioned by name in 16:17.

²⁷ Lit. “I belong to Paul ... I belong to Apollos ... I belong to Cephas ... I belong to Christ.” Cf. also 3:4.

²⁸ For this formulation (ἐγώ ... Παύλου, ἐγώ ... Ἀπολλῶ, ἐγώ ... Κηφᾶ, ἐγώ ... Χριστοῦ), cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Vit. phil.* 6.82, and Plutarch, *Num.* 17.3 (*Vit. par.* 71E).

²⁹ Cf. Acts 18.

Apollos in particular who is very popular among the members of the Christian community in Corinth, and who represents a real threat to his authority.

Cephas, the third “leader” mentioned by Paul in verse 12, is Peter, the most prominent disciple of Jesus and one of the leaders of the Christian community in Jerusalem.³⁰ We do not know whether Peter had once visited the city of Corinth; it is possible, but not very probable. Nevertheless, we can assume that the Corinthian Christians had heard about him³¹ and understood that he was one of those who had known Jesus in person and who was now one of the Christian leaders in Jerusalem.³² It is therefore quite understandable that there were Christians in Corinth who had become supporters of Peter.

The fourth name mentioned by Paul is “Christ.” Many scholars think that what we are dealing with here is some kind of a practical joke by Paul; he wants to add a little force to his argument in order to show the Corinthians that their divisions are completely absurd and ridiculous. But Paul’s reaction to the division in the Corinthian community starts with verse 13, and rhetorically it would not be wise to add a fictitious and absurd example (a “Christ party”). It is therefore more likely that Paul was informed by some members of Chloe’s household that a “Christ party” did indeed exist in Corinth. Perhaps its members just opposed the other parties, not understanding that Jesus Christ’s role in God’s plan of salvation was completely different from the role of the apostles or missionaries of the Gospel. Being “followers” or “supporters” of Christ is something that applies to all Christians (see 3:23) of course, but when it goes hand-in-hand with the rejection of those apostles or preachers who are servants of God and ordained to proclaim the Gospel, there comes into being something which can be called a “Christ party”; and that is something which, according to Paul, is to be rejected.

In verse 13, Paul wants his readers in Corinth to see how absurd and foolish such a division is. He attempts to achieve this by means of three rhetorical questions. With the first question, “Has Christ then been split into multiple

³⁰ His name was originally “Simon,” but he became generally known by his nickname “Cephas” (in Aramaic) or “Peter” (in Greek) (see John 1:42). Paul usually names him “Cephas” (1 Cor 1:12, 3:22, 9:5, 15:5, Gal 1:18, 2:9, 11, and 14), only twice “Peter” (Gal 2:7-8).

³¹ See also 1 Cor 15:5.

³² See Gal 2:9.

people?" (lit. "Has Christ been divided?"), Paul wants to make clear that nobody can take Jesus Christ's place in God's plan of salvation (v. 13a).³³ Paul, Apollos, Peter and other people are not "divisions" or "offshoots"—as it were—of Jesus Christ, with each one of them playing a more or less similar role to that of Christ himself. For it is Christ who was crucified for the sake of others, and not, for instance, Paul (v. 13b). That Paul uses the term "crucify" ("was crucified for you") here in this context, instead of the usual formula "(He) died (for us),"³⁴ shows that he wants to stress the fact that Jesus Christ died *on the cross*: he did not just die, but he was *crucified*, which implies the uttermost form of suffering and humiliation. This will become a central theme in the paragraphs which follow.

The last phrase in verse 13, "Or were you baptised in the name of Paul?," is another rhetorical question intended to make clear that all Christians have been baptised "in the name of Christ,"³⁵ and not in the name of somebody else. When people are christened "in the name of Jesus Christ" they have accepted Christ as their Lord and Saviour. This shows once again that there can be no place for a "Paul party" or any other party whatsoever in the Christian community.

In verses 14-16, Paul comments on the last phrase of verse 13, that is, on the event of any christening "in the name of" Paul (or any other Gospel preacher). Perhaps there were people in Corinth (or elsewhere) who held those who had baptised them in high esteem and, as a consequence, became "supporters" or "followers" of their baptisers. Paul makes it clear that he is happy that he baptised only a few people in Corinth: only Crispus and Gaius and, as he adds as a kind of afterthought, Stephanas and his household.

In Acts 18:8, it is told that Crispus had been the official or the president of the synagogue in Corinth when Paul was preaching the Gospel in that city, and that he became a believer in Jesus Christ—that is, of course, if this Crispus is the same as the one mentioned here by Paul.

³³ Here, "Christ" refers to Jesus Christ, as in the previous verse, not to "the body of Christ," that is, the Christian Church.

³⁴ See, e.g., Rom 5:6-8, 2 Cor 5:15, and 1 Thess 5:10. The formulation "(He) has been *crucified* for us" is unique in the NT.

³⁵ Cf., e.g., Acts 2:38, 8:16, 10:48, and 19:5.

Gaius may have been Paul's host in Corinth when the apostle wrote his letter to the Romans (see Rom 16:23) if, once again, Paul is referring to the same person. This is far from certain; "Gaius" was a common name at the time.

From 1 Corinthians 16:15-17 we can conclude that Stephanas and the people living in his household were the first ones in the Roman province of Achaia, of which Corinth was the capital, who came to believe in Jesus Christ. As such, they had a particular position in the Christian community in Corinth.³⁶ Passages like Acts 11:14, 16:15, 32, 34, and 18:8 make clear that it was quite common when somebody became a Christian for his entire "household," that is, all those who lived together with the master or the lady of the house (children, parents, relatives, and slaves) to become Christians and to be baptised.

In short: Paul reminds his readers in Corinth that he has baptised only a few people. Probably he left the act of baptism to his associates.³⁷

Paul ends this paragraph with the statement that "Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the Gospel" (v. 17a). He knows that he has been sent by God or Jesus Christ to preach the Gospel,³⁸ and this mission has dictated the path of his life.³⁹

A new theme comes to the fore in the last part of verse 17, one which Paul will explain in detail in the following sections in Chapters 1 and 2. It is that his message about Jesus Christ has nothing to do "with words of wisdom, lest the message of the cross of Christ be no more than empty talk." With the term "wisdom," which Paul clearly rejects here, he refers to a kind of earthly, worldly, or human wisdom as opposed to godly wisdom (see vv. 18-31). His message is not a matter of worldly wisdom, but it is full of godly wisdom (see 2:1-5). Otherwise, his message about "the cross of Christ" would be "empty talk."⁴⁰ For in the eyes of humans, being saved by somebody's death (or crucifixion) might seem a rather foolish message, and certainly not a message of wisdom. From the fact that Paul unexpectedly and abruptly introduces the term "wisdom" here, right after his words about the divisions and factions within the Christian community in Corinth, we

³⁶ Cf. also, e.g., Rom 16:5.

³⁷ Cf., e.g., Acts 10:48, where it is said that Peter "ordered them (= Cornelius and his people) to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ."

³⁸ Cf. Acts 22:21, and 26:17.

³⁹ See, e.g., Rom 1:15, 15:20, 1 Cor 9:16, 18, 15:1-11, and 2 Cor 10:16.

⁴⁰ Cf. Gal 5:11.