

4.13 Paul and Corinth

reasons. Some of the Corinthians had asked for Paul's advice on a variety of issues, such as how married people were to live before Jesus' return (1 Cor 7:1) and whether they could eat food that had been sacrificed in an idol temple (1 Cor 8:1). Others had questions about the role of spiritual gifts – for example, how to manage the collection for the poor in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1).

Paul had also heard some disturbing reports about arguments and other problems within the community (1 Cor 1:11–12). He was particularly concerned with the fact that there was immorality in the community and that Christians were taking others to court (1 Cor 6:1). If this wasn't bad enough, imagine his distress when he learned that their celebrations of the Lord's Supper had become a source of division rather than unity (1 Cor 11:17). Some of the rich members were looking after themselves at the meal and were already finished and drunk before the poor and slaves arrived. Paul also had to deal with

Paul's letters to the house churches of Corinth give us plenty of information about early Christianity and the life, issues, struggles and beliefs of early Christians. Ancient Corinth was like Singapore or Hong Kong today: bustling with life, filled with traders and travellers from north, south, east and west. This meant that the first groups of believers were a mixed group of Jews and Greeks, Romans and locals, slaves and free, rich and poor – all attracted by the message of Jesus. While united by their belief in Jesus, the community of believers in Corinth faced plenty of challenges brought about by a growth in numbers and various misunderstandings.

The first letter was written for a number of

Before the temple of Apollo at Corinth, built around 500 BC from local limestone on top of a hill to the north of Acrocorinth. Only seven columns of the temple remain standing, although parts of the ground plan of the building are visible in the rubble. Son of Zeus and Leto, and twin brother of Artemis, Apollo was one of Greece's most important gods. Over the centuries, he was worshipped as god of archery, music and dance, truth and prophecy, healing and diseases, and the sun and light.



A stained-glass window at Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin, containing images based on descriptions of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23. In the centre is the Lord, as the Good Shepherd, and the word 'LOVE'. Starting at the top and moving in a clockwise direction: JOY & PEACE (represented by an angel carrying a scroll with the inscription Gloria in excelsis deo); LONGSUFFERING (Job); FAITH (Jonathan), GENTLENESS & GOODNESS (Ruth), MEEKNESS (Moses) and TEMPERANCE (John the Baptist).

made clear in the second letter that while the 'Day of the Lord' (Christ's second coming) was near, it wasn't as close as many might think, and it certainly had not already come. He explained that certain signs and events had to occur first, and it was important to continue regular work and not be idle (2 Thess 3:6–15).

Paul: missionary, pastor, teacher

These three letters give us unique insight into Paul the missionary, pastor and teacher. His vision of Christ on the road to Damascus convinced him of the truth about Jesus Christ.

He knew he was called by God to spread this good news as far as he could (Gal 1:12). We see his passion and missionary enthusiasm in the letter to the Galatians. And in the letters to the Thessalonians, we also see his compassion and pastoral care – they are full of moving expressions of love and concern for the Christians in the communities he established.

In all three of these letters, we see a great thinker who was able to help people see a new way of understanding who Jesus was and how to follow him as the way to God.

The Roman forum of Thessaloniki, constructed in the late 1st century AD. The forum was the social, religious and administrative centre of Thessaloniki. It was discovered by accident in the 1960s, when the area was dug up to construct Thessaloniki's city hall. Archaeologists uncovered a large complex: two-storey porticoes; an underground stoa (walkway); two Roman baths; mosaic floors; and a small theatre or odeon, which was used for gladiatorial games. The entire complex surrounded a rectangular paved open area that was used as a meeting or gathering place.



the problem posed by some Christians who thought they were already in their resurrected bodies or did not believe in a bodily resurrection at all (1 Cor 15).

Paul had his work cut out to address these issues and heal the divisions among the Christians in Corinth. The heart of the problem was that they had lost sight of the basis of their faith. For Paul, all Christian life is based on God's love shown by Jesus giving his life on the cross. This is not the wisdom of the world, but God's wisdom and the source of true strength (1 Cor 1:23–24). Once the Corinthians understood that everyone was part of the one body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12) and that they were all brothers and sisters, their attitudes and behaviour would change for the better. So many of the other problems present in the community could then be dealt with and resolved.

In reading the second letter to the Corinthians, it becomes clear that, despite his best attempts, some of the community did not accept Paul's teaching and advice. After writing 1 Corinthians, Paul planned to visit

the community on his way to Macedonia, and then again as he returned, heading towards Jerusalem with the collection for the starving Christians in Judea. The first visit went very badly, with some rejecting Paul and opposing him. He did not return to Corinth as he had planned. Hurt and bewildered, he wrote the community a severe letter that he sent by means of Titus (2 Cor 2:1–4; 7:8, 12, 14–16). That letter is lost to us, but the second letter to the Corinthians indicates that the community had changed its mind, and this was reported to Paul by Titus when they met in Macedonia. In 2 Corinthians 1–9, Paul tries to heal his relationship with the community (2 Cor 2:5–10) and explain his actions (2 Cor 1:15–22). Paul writes from the depths of his heart about the experience of being an apostle in 2 Corinthians 1–4, dealing with both acceptance and rejection for the sake of the gospel message.

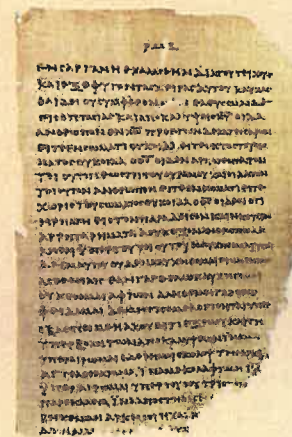
Once the ruptured relationship with the community has been re-established, Paul takes the opportunity to make sure that the collection begun the previous year will be

completed. He returns to this theme in 2 Corinthians 8–9. The situation with the community has deteriorated once again, and 2 Corinthians 10–13 is mainly concerned with Paul defending himself in the face of those he considers to be false apostles.

These letters are not always easy reading as they cover a lot of serious issues, including conflict. However, this is the very reason they are useful for us today. They remind us that there have always been challenges in following Christ in community, but with the right attitude of love based on the cross of Jesus, issues can be resolved.



The ruins of ancient Corinth, with the Acrocorinth in the background – the acropolis of ancient Corinth. 'Acropolis' means 'high city' in Greek and describes the natural fortresses constructed on high, rocky ground in Greece. The highest peak on the site was home to a temple to Aphrodite. The Acrocorinth played an important role in the defence of southern Greece: it was easily defensible and had a secure water supply (a spring, behind the temple). Because of its position, it was able to guard the narrow strip



2 Corinthians 11:33–12:9 from P46, a 3rd-century papyrus codex written in Greek. It is the oldest known copy of the writings of Paul and one of the earliest forms of the New Testament. Codices were not widely used in the ancient world until the 2nd century AD, when they began to replace the papyrus roll. Around 30 centimetres tall and 30 metres or more in length, papyrus rolls recorded long works of literature or were cut into smaller pieces for shorter documents. Eventually, papyrus was replaced by parchment, then by paper, as manuscripts grew more decorative and eventually gave way to printed books.



1 Corinthians 13, in Chinese script. This text is the apostle Paul's great hymn on Christian love. It is one of the most famous passages of Scripture and it is regularly quoted at weddings. As Paul describes what love is in this text, he describes a person – Jesus. Jesus is the living embodiment of this outgoing, love-



The Apostle Paul Writes to the Church in Corinth – German priest-painter Sieger Köder's stained-glass window in the Holy Spirit Church in Ellwangen, Germany. Scholars believe Paul wrote four letters to the Corinthians, two of which we have in the New Testament. These letters give us a glimpse into Paul as a pastor, rather than a theologian or an apostle. His words show that he cares for the Corinthian church with a deep and resilient love. He constantly affirmed his love for them, even when he had to correct or discipline them.