A LOOK AT A BOOK: 1 Corinthians
March 25, 2012

When we read Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, we are literally reading somebody else's mail. This letter was originally addressed to a fledgling mission church, a small band of people in the ancient Mediterranean city of Corinth. No doubt the Corinthian Christians of Paul's day would have preferred that this correspondence not be broadcast to the ages. We are given a privileged glimpse of one particular tension-filled moment in the life of the first generation of the Christian movement.

What are we to do with the information gained by eavesdropping on this conversation between the agitated apostle and his refractory followers? We can read someone else's mail as God's word to us only because God has chosen – oddly, we might think – to convey ongoing guidance to his people through the finite medium of this specific text.

The Setting of the Letter

The city of Corinth. Corinth was a prosperous commercial crossroads in classical antiquity. Its location on the Isthmus of Corinth, overlooking the two ports of Cenchreae and Lechaeum, allowed it to command a major east-west trade route between the Aegean and Ionian seas. Small ships could actually be carted across the isthmus; shipments from larger vessels were unloaded, transferred on land to the other side, and reloaded at the other port. Additionally, Corinth boasted the Isthmian games, an athletic festival second only to the Olympic games in importance. This event, held once every two years, attracted large crowds and generated additional revenue for the city. The importance of the Isthmian games for Corinth may be gauged by the fact that the most prestigious political office in the city was the sponsor of the games.

Corinth's prosperous commercial life, however, was interrupted in 146 B.C. when the Roman army captured the city, destroyed its buildings, and either executed or enslaved its inhabitants. The site stood virtually abandoned until, on the initiative of Julius Caesar, the city was refounded as a Roman colony in 44 B.C., less than a hundred years before Paul's arrival on the scene. Many of the colonists were former slaves, Roman freedmen who would have discovered in the newly refounded city opportunities for economic and social advancement not available to them elsewhere. In our reading of Paul's letter, it will be useful to remember that he was writing to a

church in a city only a few generations removed from its founding by colonists seeking upward social mobility.

The accounts of Strabo and of the second-century writer Pausanias indicate that the city supported numerous sites of pagan worship and was adorned by magnificent statues of gods and goddesses in public places, including a large statue of Athena in the middle of the *agora* (marketplace). The Corinthian Christians would have been confronted on a daily basis by these imposing symbolic reminders of the religiopolitical world out of which they had been called.

From Acts 18:1-17 we know that there was also a Jewish community in Corinth, as confirmed by a passing comment by Paul's contemporary, Philo of Alexandria (*Legatio ad Gaium* 281). An inscription referring to the "Synagogue of the Hebrews" has been found in the excavation of the site, but we have no information about the size of the Jewish community, and it appears from the content of Paul's letters to Corinth that most members of Paul's fledgling Christian community were of Gentile, rather than Jewish, ancestry. This meant that Paul was faced with a massive task of resocialization, seeking to reshape the moral imaginations of these Gentile converts into patterns of life consonant with the ways of the God of Israel.

The occasion of the letter. Paul had founded the Christian community in Corinth through his preaching and teaching (Acts 18:1-11); consequently, he describes himself as having planted the community (1 Corinthians 3:6), or having laid its foundation (3:10), or even as having "fathered" it (4:15). Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth (Acts 18:11), sufficient time to develop significant relationships there and to provide extensive instruction. In accordance with his mission of organizing new communities, once the church was up and running, he moved on. It is likely that Paul left Corinth during the year 51 A.D. and that this letter known to us as 1 Corinthians was written some time later, probably during the interval 53-55 A.D. The letter itself indicates that it was written from Ephesus during the spring of the year, prior to Pentecost (1 Corinthians 16:8). Paul had been away long enough for new problems and serious misunderstandings to arise within the Corinthian community. From the letter itself we learn that he had written to them at least once previously (5:9); this correspondence, unfortunately, is lost to us, unless a fragment of it is preserved in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1.

Two convergent factors precipitated Paul's writing of 1 Corinthians. First, he had received a report from "Chloe's people" – presumably members of the household headed by a woman named Chloe – that there was serious dissension within the community (1 Corinthians 1:18; 18:18). Their report presumably also included alarming information about other problems within the Corinthians church: sexual

immorality (5:1-8; 6:12-20), legal disputes (6:1), abuses of the Lord's Supper (11:17-34), and controversies about the resurrection of the dead (15:1-58). Second, the Corinthians themselves had written to Paul (7:1a) asking for his advice about several things. Their letter had certainly posed questions about sex within marriage (7:1b-40) and eating meat that had been offered to idols (8:1-11:1); probably it had also raised the issues of spiritual gifts in the community's worship (12:1-14:40) and Paul's collection for Jerusalem (16:1-4).

The character of his response suggests that he sees the members of the Corinthian church as standing – contrary to their own self-perception – at a moment of crisis and testing (10:11-13). A longer visit will be required to sort out all the problems of which he has been apprised. The letter, then, is a stopgap measure until Paul himself can get there to deal with the issues in greater depth.

The Corinthian church and its "theology." The Corinthian church, founded by Paul, had been in existence for only about five years at the time of the writing of this letter. The community had a few Jewish members, including Crispus (1:14), described in Acts 18:8 as a leader of the Corinthian synagogue. Most of the members of the community, however, were Gentile converts. Some of these, like the Titius Justus mentioned in Acts 18:7, may have been attracted to Judaism before Paul came to Corinth to preach (i.e., they had been "Godfearers," Gentile adherents of the synagogue who had not taken the step of becoming full Jewish proselytes by undergoing circumcision). Because Christians met in private homes and had no public buildings, the size of their gathering was limited by the size of the villas of the most affluent members of the community. Such houses could have accommodated no more than 30 to 50 people for the common meal. It is, therefore, likely that there were several separate house church gatherings, meeting in the homes of leaders such as Stephanas (16:15-18). Over time, such house church communities might have developed different practices and even acknowledged different leaders, thus exacerbating the problem of factions within the community. If each of the factions mentioned in 1:12 represents a different house church (a possible but uncertain assumption), there might have been as many as 150 to 200 Christians in the city at the time of Paul's writing. It is impossible, however, to be certain about this; there could have been more or fewer.

One thing that we do know, however many Christians there may have been in Corinth, is that they represented a spectrum of differing social and economic classes, ranging from prosperous household heads to slaves. This socioeconomic diversity - highly unusual for any voluntary association either in the ancient world or today – created some tensions and difficulties within the church.

The phenomenon of status diversity in the Corinthian church may come as a surprise to those who are used to thinking of early Christianity as a movement of the underclass. Erastus, a city official of Corinth who became part of Paul's mission team (see Romans 16:23; Acts 19:22; 2 Timothy 4:20), was a man wealthy enough to fund and dedicate a costly public pavement for the city. An inscription found in the city reads, "Erastus, for his aedileship, constructed [this pavement] at his own expense."

Major Theological Themes in the Letter

Christology. From beginning to end, Paul interprets every issue in light of "the testimony of Christ" (1:6). Paul's gospel is fundamentally the story of Jesus crucified and raised from the dead (2:2; 11:23-26; 15:3-5), and he insists that the identity of the community must be shaped with reference to this story. God has redefined "wisdom" through Christ's death and resurrection (1:30) and the meaning of love is exemplified in him. The christology of the letter does not emphasize Jesus' death as a means of atonement for sin; rather, Paul highlights Jesus' role as the initiator of a new apocalyptic age, the precursor of a new humanity set free from death (15:20-28). His self-sacrificial death defines the pattern for the life of the community.

Apocalyptic eschatology. They are living in a time of eschatological urgency, in which "the ends of the ages have met" (10:11). Virtually every page of Paul's letter seeks to reframe the Corinthians' vision of existence with this "already/not yet" eschatological dialectic.

Embodied existence. Against the Corinthians' tendency to deprecate the physical body, Paul repeatedly insists on the meaningfulness of the body and its actions. Our bodies are created by God, sanctified in the present through union with Christ (6:12-20), and designed for ultimate redemption through resurrection (15:35-58).

The primacy of love. Reacting to the Corinthians' overemphasis on knowledge and wisdom, Paul affirms that love must rule over all other values and virtues (8:1-13; 12:31b-13:13; 16:14).

The transformation of power and status through the cross. Paul repeatedly argues that the gospel overturns the world's notions of power and social standing. Old status distinctions no longer count "in the Lord." and all power relations must be reinterpreted in light of the cross.