

When Church Becomes Messy: First Corinthians

1 – FIRST CORINTHIANS: INTRODUCTION

I. The Nature of the New Testament Epistles

A. New Testament Literature

- The New Testament is made up of four types of books.
- The Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), Historical (Acts), Apocalyptic (Revelation) and the Epistles.
- Each type of book varies in its purpose and structure.
- The difference in types requires approaching the book based on its type.

B. The Epistles (Letters)

- The epistles can be divided into two groups: The Letters of Paul and The General Letters.

C. Characteristics of the Epistles

- The epistles are not consistent and uniform.

When studying the epistles, it must be recognized that each epistle differs in its purpose. Some of the epistles were personal letters that were not written for the public. They were intended for the person or persons to whom they were addressed. Philemon is an example of a personal letter that was written by the apostle Paul. Other epistles were written for the purpose of public reading in the churches such as 1 John and Hebrews. The epistles to the Romans and Philemon differ from one another not only in content but also to the degree that one is far more personal than the other.

- The epistles were intended for a specific occasion.

The epistles do have one common factor that must be considered when reading and interpreting them. The epistles are occasional documents in that they were written because of a specific situation during the first century after the Resurrection. Even though they are inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus belong to all time, they were written out of the context of the writer to the context of the original recipients. This can create a problem for the student as he has difficulty in interpreting the epistles in his cultural context.

- The occasion of the epistle must be taken seriously.

The epistles require that the reader have an understanding of the occasion for which they were written. Almost all of the epistles in the New Testament were in response to a specific occasion or issue. The occasions for the letters include behavior that needed correcting, doctrinal error that needed to be set right, or a misunderstanding that needed to be explained further. Most of the problems we have in studying the epistles emerge from the fact that we have the answers, but we do not necessarily know or understand the questions or problems that are being addressed.

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- The epistles are not necessarily theological treatises.

It must be recognized by the student that the epistles are first of all not theological treatises. There is theology implied in the epistles, but it is often theology that was written for an issue that was at hand during the time it was written. While one can go to the epistles for theology, it must be kept in mind that they were not written to expound Christian theology. It is always theology written for a particular need.

D. Basic Rules for the Epistles

- The text cannot mean what the verses never meant to its author or original readers.

The student must spend time prayerfully considering what the meaning for the scriptural text was for the reader in the first century. This guideline does not necessarily help the student find what the scriptural text means, but it does help set the limits as to what it cannot mean.

- Where we share similar life situations with the first century church, God's word is the same for us.

This rule directs the student to take most of the theological sections and community-directed commands and apply them to his cultural context.

II. Introduction to First Corinthians

A. The Author and the Date of Letter

- The author of the letter is the apostle Paul who established the church in Corinth.
- The date of the letter is A.D. 55.

SCRIPTURE Acts 18:1-18

B. The Purpose of the Letter

- The letter provides a glimpse into the 1st century church and its problems.
- The first part of the letter is an attempt by the apostle to deal with problems in the church.
- In the second part of the letter, the apostle addresses various questions posed by the church.
- The final question that the apostle deals with is the defense of the resurrection.

C. A Basic Outline Of First Corinthians

1. The Church's Problems (1 Corinthians 1:1-6:20)
2. The Church's Questions (1 Corinthians 7:1-16:24)