

THE LETTERS OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS

On first glance it is assumed that Paul only wrote 2 letters to the church at Corinth, but closer study shows that there were at least 4 letters that the apostle wrote to this early church. The following is a briefly described accounting of the letters and their possible or probable content.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church is known only from the reference made to it in what we commonly call 1 Corinthians. It is a letter that has been lost to us, no doubt considered by God to be unnecessary for our instruction. In 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 Paul wrote,

"I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler — not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES." (my emphasis supplied)

This letter, which we will call "A Corinthians", was written having some knowledge of some immoral behavior in the church which needed discipline, and Paul was giving instruction regarding what we would call withdrawal of fellowship discipline. However, it appears that the instruction was misunderstood, and that some had thought that Paul was calling for a retreat from all interactions with the world.

Between "A Corinthians" and 1 Corinthians, some in the church had written back to Paul in Ephesus with some questions. This letter *from* the Corinthians is also lost to us, but we can trace the essence of it throughout Paul's response in letter that we do have, 1 Corinthians. This letter was carried and delivered by Paul's trusted fellow worker Timothy, so as to provide additional instruction and clarification (1 Corinthians 4:17). Many of the questions in the letter *from* Christians in Corinth are easily identified by the phrase "Now about..." or "Now concerning..."; starting in 1 Corinthians 7:1, "Now concerning the things **about which you wrote**...". These questions included topics about sexuality in marriage (7:1), eating meat sacrificed to idols (8:1), spiritual gifts in worship (12:1), the collection for the saints (16:1), and a possible visit from Apollos (16:12). And yet other topics, like the roles of men and women and the resurrection of the dead, were almost certainly part of their list of question, even though Paul doesn't introduce his answer to them with "Now concerning...".

Unfortunately, 1 Corinthians along with Timothy's instruction does not appear to have been well received, and it would appear that Paul may have traveled to Corinth himself to try to straighten things out, which he later called a "painful visit" (2 Corinthians 2:1). So following the two disappointing efforts (1 Corinthians and a personal visit from Paul himself) Paul wrote yet another letter, which we will call "C Corinthians". It is described in 2 Corinthians 2:3, 4,

"This is the very thing I wrote you, so that when I came, I would not have sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice; having confidence in you all that my joy would be the joy of you all. For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you."

It was apparently a letter of strong rebuke delivered by Titus (2 Corinthians 2:12,13) and this time it appears to have had the hoped for reaction of repentance (2 Corinthians 7:6-11).

Since "C Corinthians" had the desired effect, Paul then writes a rather conciliatory letter that we know as 2 Corinthians, bringing the total of letters we know of to at least 4.

I say "at least", because there is a hint that there might be a fifth letter. The hint is in the different attitudes displayed between 2 Corinthians 1-9 and 2 Corinthians 10-13. The first part of the book is conciliatory and encouraging, while the second section seems more defensive and frustrated. There are 3 theories that have been raised about these differences.

The first theory is that 2 Corinthians 1-13 was written all at the same time, but that Paul was wanting to smooth things over with the Corinthian church after all their turbulence, but that there may have already arisen yet another threat, outside interlopers that were disdainful toward Paul as a real apostle. Thus, in one and the same letter Paul needed to be both conciliatory and defensive of his apostolic authority.

The second is that 2 Corinthians 10-13 is the "tearful letter" ("C Corinthians"), tacked on (out of order) and merged with the more conciliatory 2 Corinthians.

The third conjecture that has been raised is that the writing of 2 Corinthians worldly minded interlopers had visited the church in Corinth and had disparaged Paul and what he had taught in contrast to their high-flown credentials and speaking skills. Thus, 2 Corinthians 10-13 might be yet another letter from Paul, "E Corinthians", to lay out his own more spiritual credentials which has simply been tacked on (in order) at the end of 2 Corinthians 9.

Whether all of 2 Corinthians (1-13) was originally written by Paul *at one time* as, or whether it is really "C Corinthians" or even "E Corinthians" we will never know on this side of eternity. What we do have is what God wants us to know, and as Deut. 29:29 tells us, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.