

# The Year of St. Paul

## The First Letter to the Corin-



### **INTRODUCTION**

Saint Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians some time after he had already visited Corinth. The exact year is not known, but Scripture scholars estimate that he wrote this letter some time between 52 A.D. and 57 A.D.

Corinth is a port city located in present-day Greece and situated very near two seas: the Aegean Sea and the Adriatic Sea. At the time of Saint Paul, Corinth was a busy center of commerce. Understandably, it had some of the moral problems of a cosmopolitan city, but its reputation for moral behavior was probably not much different from that of any other major Mediterranean port.

As a direct result of the missionary efforts of Saint Paul, Corinth became an important center of Christianity.

Paul's incentive to write this letter involved two issues. He wanted to respond to requests for his advice regarding some problems that the Corinthians were experiencing. Secondly, he wanted to correct some misunderstandings that certain Corinthians had concerning what a Christian community should be like.

This First Letter to the Corinthians follows the typical letter form of the time: (1) an opening formula, (2) an expression of thanksgiving, (3) the main message, and (4) a conclusion with personal news and a blessing.

In the opening formula, Paul identifies Sosthenes as a fellow writer of the letter, composed most likely in Ephesus. Paul then expresses thanks to God because of the grace that the Corinthians have already received in Christ Jesus.

In the first chapter, Paul assures the Corinthians that Jesus will be with them to keep them firm in the faith until the end of the world, when Jesus Himself

will return. Paul wants the Corinthians to know that God is faithful in His relationship with them and that they need to be united among themselves rather than separated by dissension.

Paul points out that he was not sent to the Corinthians in order to baptize them but rather

to preach to them. This may surprise us insofar as we are accustomed to priests who routinely baptize as well as preach. Paul wants to emphasize that his responsibility is to preach the gospel and that, by implication, other leaders among the Christians can take care of baptizing new members.

Then Paul teaches the Corinthians that it is the will of God to save people who believe in Jesus. This statement does not delve into the question that we might have about whether or not people who do not believe in Jesus but who are genuinely sincere can be saved. The Church's teaching in this regard was clarified to a considerable extent by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which taught that even sincere atheists "are related to" the Church as the People of God. Provided that they strive to live a good life according to their consciences, people who sincerely do not believe that God exists can receive from God---in a manner that they do not realize---the necessary assistance for them to be saved and go to heaven.

The next major point that Paul makes is that the very center of his preaching is "Christ Crucified." In emphasizing Jesus as crucified, Paul is implying that the crucified Jesus is alive again. Thus it is worth it for Paul to preach about somebody who was killed, and it is worth it for the Corinthians to believe in somebody who was killed precisely because that person----Jesus of Nazareth---came back to life.

## GOD FIRST

*Year Three, Part 14*

**November 2, 2008**

What's more, Jesus came back to life by His own power. Paul acknowledges that this is difficult to accept as true. Such a difficulty he describes as "a stumbling block" to Jewish people and as "foolishness" to Gentiles. Nevertheless, Paul does not hesitate to affirm that Jesus is, in fact, "the power of God and the wisdom of God."

Paul then describes Jesus as our "righteousness, sanctification, and redemption." By this Paul means to say that Jesus Himself is the embodiment of everything that it means for us to become righteous (or to be made right with God), for us to be sanctified (or made holy in the sight of God), and for us to be redeemed (or rescued from our sins against God). Jesus has come to embody all this for us because He is the "Christ Crucified," the man executed on a cross who proved that He was "the Anointed One"---the Christ ---by rising from the dead.

In the second chapter Saint Paul points out to the Corinthians that their belief in Jesus does not depend on human wisdom but rather on the power of God.

This means that the brilliance or lack thereof that a preacher possesses is not the basis on which listeners place their faith in Jesus. In effect, this point relieves the preacher of preaching an inspiring homily or a cleverly delivered homily with impressive rhetorical skills and spell-binding elocution. Instead, the preacher need only proclaim in a simple but clear manner the message that Jesus is the One in whom every human being is invited to place his or her faith. Instead of basing faith on eloquence and rhetorical skill, the faith of a Christian is based on the power of God. This "power" refers to the grace of God working within us in an invisible but real way, helping us to believe in Jesus as Son of God.

In order to help us in this way, Paul explains to the Corinthians that God predetermined to use His divine wisdom for our benefit. In other words, it is God's wisdom---not our wisdom or the wisdom of any preacher---that is the real power enabling ordinary people to make the all-important act of faith that Jesus died and rose for our salvation. Paul stresses that we

Wheel taken from "Reading the Acts, Epistles and Revelation by Kingsley E. Dalpadado, OMI, St. Paul Editions

Christians have received the Spirit of God so that we can understand---at least to some extent---the things that we have been told about God. The "Spirit of God" that Christians have received is God the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity.

### **POINTS FOR REFLECTION:**

The Catholic Church teaches that Jesus came to save everyone. What did you learn about our faith in regard to the salvation of people who are not baptized? (cf. Chapter 1)

Preaching "Christ Crucified" makes sense to us because Jesus rose from the grave. How would you talk about our faith to someone who is puzzled that you would base your whole life on someone who was executed? (cf. Chapter 1)

To what extent do you let your practice of our faith depend on the eloquence or rhetorical skill of the priest who gives the homily? (cf. Chapter 2)