

Corinthians, First Epistle to the. II. Christianity

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The reception of 1 Corinthians can be traced back to the end of the 1st century CE, when Clement of Rome (*1 Clement*) reminds the Corinthians of their former partisanship and alludes to Paul's passages on the church as Christ's body and on the resurrection (1 Cor 1:10-12; 12:12-27; 15:20, 36-38). In the early 2nd century CE, Ignatius of Antioch refers to Paul's words on the scandal of the cross and implicitly identifies himself with the apostle's disputed position (1 Cor 1:18-23; 4:4, 13; 15:8-10).

According to patristic references (mainly by Tertullian of Carthage), Marcion interpreted 1 Corinthians as a confirmation of his distinction between the high God who sent Christ, and the inferior Creator. Patristic authors (mainly Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus of Rome) also testify to Valentinian interpretations concerning, e.g., the distinction between spiritual people, psychic believers, and material people (1 Cor 1:18; 2:6-15; 3:1-3; 15:45-49). Some passages were applied to the Valentinian myth of Sophia who left the heavenly *πλήρωμα* (1 Cor 2:6; 11:10; 15:8). Among the Nag Hammadi Codices, *The Exegesis of the Soul* (NHC II,6) quotes 1 Cor 5:9-10 on keeping distance from immoral persons, and *The Interpretation of Knowledge* (NHC XI,1) alludes to Paul's passage on the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:8-21). The *Treatise on the Resurrection* (NHC I,4) and the *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II,3) interpret Paul's instruction on the resurrection with regard to spiritual resurrection in the present life and after one's death (1 Cor 15:44, 50, 53). The few fragments of "heterodox" reception of 1 Corinthians that have been preserved lead one to suspect that far more of such interpretations are lost.

In his work *Against Heresies* Irenaeus often quotes 1 Corinthians to demonstrate the unity of the Old and the New Testaments and consequently the belief in one God, the good Creator. In his view, the "spiritual body" that believers will receive in the resurrection (1 Cor 15:44) will be a material body led by the Spirit. Likewise, Tertullian also refers to 1 Corinthians to counter heterodox interpretations. He interprets Paul's criticism of the wisdom of the world (1 Cor 1:20, 27) with regard to Greek philosophy, which he considers the source of all heresies. Being inspired by Montanism, he appeals to Paul's discussion of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:8-10; 14:25-26), and quotes 1 Corinthians (e.g., 5:9-11; 6:9-11) to criticize the Church for its lax attitude towards sinners and its lavish possibilities of doing penance. Clement of Alexandria thinks that Paul's refutation of worldly wisdom only concerns the Jews and Epicurus' atheism and hedonism, and does not apply to

philosophers such as Socrates and Plato. Referring to 1 Corinthians (e.g., 1:26-27; 2:6-10; 3:1-3; 8:7), he distinguishes between psychic and more advanced “gnostic” believers. His interpretations of 1 Corinthians sometimes resemble the Valentinian views, although he explicitly keeps his distance from the Valentinians themselves.

Origen of Alexandria was the first preacher whose sermons on 1 Corinthians were published as a running commentary, but this is lost except for almost 100 catenae excerpts. In his works he appeals to 1 Corinthians for his distinction between plain believers and advanced Christians, the latter of which take the requirements of the gospel more seriously and have a deeper understanding of the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures. Origen regularly refers to 1 Cor 2:12-16; 9:9-10, and 10:1-13 in order to defend his allegorical interpretations of the Scriptures, including several passages of 1 Corinthians itself (e.g., 3:10-12; 7:18-23; 8:7-13; 11:3; 15:39). In his view, the “spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44) of the resurrected will be ethereal but not incorporeal. He appeals to 1 Cor 15:24-28 for his conviction that the “universal restoration” (ἀποκατάστασις; Acts 3:21) of creation will take place when Christ, having overcome all hostile forces, will subject himself and all of his reign to God, after which God will be all in all. During and after his life Origen’s universalistic and spiritualizing interpretation of this passage has been criticized and condemned, as if he had taught automatic salvation for believers, unbelievers, and the devil alike.

Starting from the 3rd century CE, more running commentaries on 1 Corinthians were composed. Furthermore, the reception and interpretation of the letter appear in the works of numerous authors who quote and discuss individual passages (e.g., Athanasius of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, Hilary of Poitiers, Jerome, Augustine of Hippo). According to Jerome (*Epistles* 48.3; 119.2) Dionysius of Alexandria and Pierius (3rd century CE) wrote commentaries on 1 Corinthians, but these are lost. Jerome mentions several Greek commentaries of 4th-century authors, some of which are lost as well (Eusebius of Caesarea, Theodore of Heraclea, Apollinaris). Excerpts from other 4th-century commentaries on 1 Corinthians have survived in the Greek catenae or in Latin translations (Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Didymus the Blind, Severian of Gabala). John Chrysostom’s homilies, however, have been fully preserved, as well as Ambrosiaster’s Latin commentary. A commentary by Ephraem the Syrian is known through an Armenian translation. From the 5th century CE, Pelagius’ Latin commentary and Theodoret of Cyrus’ Greek one have been preserved, while Cyril of Alexandria’s interpretation is known from the catenae and from his other works. Later patristic and medieval commentaries include the works by, among others, John of Damascus, Photius of Constantinople, and Theophylact in Greek, and Cassiodore, Walafred Strabo, Hrabanus Maurus, Haymo of Auxerre, Sedulius Scotus, Atto Vercellensis, (ps.-)Bruno the Carthusian, Hugo of St. Victor, Hervaeus

Burgidolensis, Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, and Nicolas of Lyra in Latin. They often repeat the interpretations of their predecessors, but some of them, such as Photius and Nicolas of Lyra, are independent exegetes.

From this vast literature, it appears that the following texts of 1 Corinthians had a particular influence on Christian doctrine and practice. From the 4th-century CE Trinitarian disputes onward, 1 Cor 2:10-12 counted as a proof-text that the Holy Spirit is “from God”, and therefore not a creature but is united with the Father and the Son. Starting from Origen’s interpretation of the passage on salvation “as through fire” (1 Cor 3:12-15) as a purifying punishment, the Western Church developed its doctrine of purgatory. Paul’s remarks on lawsuits in 1 Cor 6:1-11 served as a justification of, and a guideline for ecclesiastical jurisdiction. His exposition on marriage and asceticism in 1 Cor 7 was fiercely debated in the 3rd to the 5th centuries CE. Teachers such as Clement of Alexandria and Jovinian of Eclanum held that marriage and celibacy had the same value in God’s eyes, but more influential authors such as John Chrysostom, Jerome, and Augustine taught that in spite of the goodness of marriage, celibacy was preferable by far for those who wanted to lead a truly spiritual life. Paul’s admonitions on idol offerings in 1 Cor 8 and 10 were understood as an appeal to abstain from all food consecrated to idols and all other idolatrous actions. Conversely, in the 16th-century Reformation, Paul’s warnings against idolatry were applied to the Roman Catholic Eucharist. His testimony to the institution of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:23-26) was included in the ancient liturgies of the Eucharist. Very influential was the verdict that the one who eats and drinks unworthily eats and drinks damnation to himself (1 Cor 11:27-29). Augustine often warns his audience not to partake of the Eucharist while living in sin, and judges that this text applies to the schismatics of his days. In the Middle Ages it served to exhort the believers to partake of the Eucharist only after having done penance. In part of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, the appeal to self-examination induced those who feared not to be predestined for salvation to abstain from the Lord’s Supper. First Corinthians 11:3-16 was read as a confirmation of the subordinate position of women. Man was considered the head of woman, and some authors concluded that woman was not created according to God’s image, or only indirectly, through man. The instruction that women were to veil themselves was not only applied to the gathering of the believers, but in various degrees also to daily life. The subordinate position of women was reinforced by the instruction that women should be silent in the churches (1 Cor 14:34-35). Therefore they were generally excluded from the priesthood and sometimes not even allowed to sing in the church. Paul’s eulogy of love (1 Cor 13) was echoed throughout the centuries, as well as his recognition that “we know only in part” and “see in a mirror, dimly,” whereas in the eschaton “we will see face to face”. Arians appealed to the apparent subordinatism expressed in the passage on Christ’s ultimate

subjection to God the Father (1 Cor 15:24-28), but Gregory of Nyssa and other authors aligned it to the Trinitarian theology of the Council of Constantinople (381 CE). The passage on the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:35-58) counted as the authoritative discourse on the eschatological transformation of the human bodies and the defeat of death. Against spiritualistic views of the resurrection, however, the saying “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 15:50) was often applied to human beings who lived “according to the flesh” (Rom 8:5), so that it did not contradict belief in “the resurrection of the flesh”.

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