

“OCCASIONAL”
LETTERS FROM PAUL
by D. A. Carson

When students of the Bible speak of Paul’s letters as “occasional,” they do not mean that they were infrequent or sporadic. They mean, rather, that in most cases they were written on specific “occasions,” perhaps to combat a particular error (as in Galatians), or to ask someone for something specific (as in Philemon), or to respond to a church’s questions (as in large parts of 1 Corinthians).

We may use 1 Corinthians as a test case. In the first major section of this epistle (1:10-4:21), Paul appeals to his readers that “there be no divisions” among them, that they may be “perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1:10). News had reached him, via “those of Chloe’s household” (1:11), that the Corinthian believers are breaking up into parties, attaching to each group the name of some leader: Paul, Apollos, Cephas, even Christ (1:12). Thus the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians are called forth, humanly speaking, by reliable reports of division in the Corinthian church. In other words, Paul is addressing a concrete “occasion.”

The next two chapters are also driven by reports of aberrant behavior among the Corinthian believers. The first instance is explicit. “It is actually reported that...” (5:1): thus Paul begins his instructions on what to do about a particularly foul case of sexual misconduct. The two topics in chapter 6, viz. lawsuits between believers (6:1-11) and sexual immorality (6:12-20), are also called forth by reports that have reached Paul’s ears. This is suggested by details in the text. For instance, in the case of lawsuits he knows of specific instances of litigation (6:7). He is not writing in a hypothetical way about what the Corinthians might do should this problem ever arise. In other words, Paul’s treatment is once again “occasional.”

From chapter 7 on, Paul deals with a series of subjects about which the Corinthians have been so exercised or so divided that they have collectively written to Paul (7:1). Many (but not all) of the topics on their list are introduced by Paul, in his response, by the telltale expression, “Now about such-and-such” (e.g., 7:1; 8:1; 12:1), but quite clearly, virtually every subject treated in chapters 7-16 has been first raised by the Corinthians.

In short, there is plenty of evidence that 1 Corinthians is an “occasional” letter. But however “occasional” most of Paul’s letters are, we will preserve perspective a little better if we observe the following points:

(1) Even when a letter by Paul is sent to deal with specific issues in a particular congregation, Paul himself recognizes that it *ought* to be read by others. “Now when this epistle is read among you,” Paul writes to the Colossians, “see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea” (Col. 4:16).

(2) Nothing in the “occasional” nature of Paul’s letters reduces his own sense of apostolic authority in penning these missives. Thus even the prophets and the “spiritually gifted” in Corinth must recognize that what Paul is writing to them on this occasion is “commandments of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37).

Among the important theological implications of these facts are the following:

(1) This is part of the massive evidence that God's gracious self-disclosure takes place in the arena of history. Unlike, say, Buddhism, which would not be jeopardized if you could prove that Gautama the Buddha never existed, biblical Christianity witnesses to God’s revealing words and acts in history. The high point of such revelation is the incarnation and all the historical events that sprang from it, including the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

(2) This view of revelation is closely tied to the truth that the God of the Bible is transcendent (He is above space and time, and invades history from “beyond” it.), personal (thus He interacts with other persons made in His image: He is a talking God), providential (He is in control of the history He invades.), and immanent (No one can escape His presence.).

(3) These and other firm links with history are usurped by unbelievers who devote much energy into disproving these historical links, hoping thereby to reduce the credibility of the Bible. The attacks are futile: the Bible is well able to withstand such assaults. But in a sense, even the attacks testify to a great truth: God has disclosed Himself in history, and that is why the skeptics keep trying to rewrite history.

(4) Inevitably, the scandalous truth that God has revealed Himself in history – to particular men and women, in human languages, in real events – leads serious Bible readers to recognize that the Bible must be interpreted in the context of these real people and events. The Bible must never be reduced to the status of an atemporal philosophical tome.

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