

FIRST CORINTHIANS



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Lesson 1

Background: First Corinthians

Key Verses

After these things Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth; and found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them. And because he was of the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers. And he reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks.

And when Silas and Timotheus were come from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ. And when they opposed themselves, and blasphemed, he shook his raiment, and said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles.

And he departed thence, and entered into a certain man's house, named Justus, one that worshipped God, whose house joined hard to the synagogue. And Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized. Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city. And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

And when Gallio was the deputy of Achaia, the Jews made insurrection with one accord against Paul, and brought him to the judgment seat (Acts 18:1-12).

Lesson Objectives

After this lesson, students should be able to

- Locate Corinth on a map
- Describe Corinth's importance as a center for culture, religion, and economics
- Understand Paul's reception by the Corinthians

Map



Lesson

Ancient Corinth

Shards of neolithic pottery suggest that the site of ancient Corinth was inhabited as early as 6500 BC. The city flourished at the base of the Acrocorinth, a large monolith rising 1,886 feet above sea level, which served as the city's citadel. The Gibraltar-like rock lies just south of the Isthmus of Corinth, which connects the Peloponnese, the southern-most part of the Balkan peninsula, with central Greece, and separates the Saronic and Corinthian gulfs from each other. Two harbors accommodated the city's position of control over the isthmus between two seas. Lechaemum served the westward-facing Corinthian Gulf, and Cenchreae functioned as the harbor on the eastward-facing Saronic Gulf. This strategic location helped Corinth to control access to lands to the north and to monitor trade, giving the city commercial and military importance.¹

The territory included a variety of terrain: the coastal plain, which was abundantly watered and fertile; relatively flat areas further from the coast, which were fairly well-watered; areas of arable sloping hills; and mountainous regions.

Corinth was prosperous enough to be named as one of the three economic centers of Greece by Plutarch, a writer of the second century. The historian Strabo wrote, "Corinth is called 'wealthy' because of its commerce, since it is situated on the Isthmus and is master of two harbors, of which the one leads straight to Asia, and the other to Italy; and it makes easy the exchange of merchandise from both countries that are so far distant from each other."

The Corinthian economy was more wide-ranging than that of many other Roman colonies. In addition to agriculture, Corinth was known for manufacturing and trade, especially of bronze, and for the Isthmian games.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancient_Corinth accessed July 24, 2020;
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Corinth-Greece> accessed July 24, 2020

Not surprisingly, the city derived income from its control of the isthmus. A charge was imposed for boats or cargo hauled on a platform across the isthmus on the “Diolkos,” a paved road. (A canal opened in 1893 that linked the two harbors.)

The Isthmian games were a big event. They were held every two years on the isthmus in honor of the Greek god Poseidon, god of water and sea, horses, and earthquakes. When Paul was in Corinth, however, the games may have been held in the city (the games moved back to the isthmus about AD 50–60.) Both men and women competed in these popular Panhellenic games. For those more interested in the arts or who wanted a mix of physical and intellectual competition, musical and oratorical contests were held at the same time in a theater on the isthmus.

Paul’s Ministry in Corinth

As Paul arrived at Corinth in AD 49 or 50, he would have seen lots of rock piles, ruins of ancient city walls. Rome had destroyed the old Corinth in 146 BC. The city Paul entered was therefore young—not even a century old. In 44 BC, a decree of Julius Caesar re-founded Corinth as a Roman colony.

As the capital of the province of Achaia, Corinth was a city of social, cultural, and religious diversity, including Jews. The Jews living there were more cosmopolitan and multicultural than those in Palestine. Paul’s visit came at a significant time for mission work. In AD 49, Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. A good number migrated to Corinth.

While Paul stayed in Corinth, he met with Jewish refugees from Rome. Paul sought out two of them, Aquila and Priscilla, because they too were tentmakers. He asked if they could work together as business associates. Aquila and Priscilla also became key leaders of the young Christian church, for I Corinthians 16:19 states, “The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.”

Around 150–200 followers of Christ lived in Corinth at the time of Paul’s writing his letters to them. Corinthian Christians lived in large, complex households and worshiped in house churches that reflected the city’s diverse ethnic make-up.

The Christians of Corinth were economically diverse. Congregations included a cross section of society—rich people, tradespeople, slaves, former slaves. Although some Christians were wealthy, they did not have high status; they were like the “new rich” of our day.

Outline of Paul’s Ministry to the Corinthians

- AD 50–51 Paul establishes the church at Corinth in eighteen months (Background in Acts 18:1–18)
- AD 53–56 Paul leaves Corinth to establish the church in Ephesus (Acts 18:23; 19:1, 8–10).
- AD 54 Paul hears about immorality at Corinth and writes a brief letter (I Corinthians 5:9)
- AD 54 People from Chloe’s household (I Corinthians 1:11) and later Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (I Corinthians 16:17) visit Paul in Ephesus; one group brings a letter (I Corinthians 7:1).
- AD 54 Paul writes I Corinthians and sends it to Corinth—perhaps with the three men above.
- AD 55 Paul hears of further problems and pays a brief, painful visit (II Corinthians 2:11; 12:18; 13:2).
- AD 55 Paul writes a third “severe” letter (II Corinthians 2:3–4, 6, 9; 7:8, 12) and sends it with Titus, who also is told to organize the collection for the needy Judean church (II Corinthians 8:6).
- AD 56 Paul leaves Ephesus for Troas but does not evangelize there (II Corinthians 2:12–13).
- AD 56 Paul crosses over into Macedonia to begin evangelizing (Acts 20:1–2, II Corinthians 2:13; 7:5).

- AD 56 Titus meets Paul in Macedonia and gives a good report of Corinth (II Corinthians 7:6-16).
- AD 56 Paul defends his ministry in II Corinthians, sending the letter with Titus (II Corinthians 8:16-24).
- AD 56 After additional evangelism, Paul spends the winter in Corinth (Romans 15:19-21; Acts 20:2) before departing for Jerusalem with the contributions for the poor churches in Judea.

SUMMARY: Paul made three visits to the Corinthians and wrote four letters, two of which are lost.

Outline of I Corinthians

- 1:1-9 Introduction
- 1:10-4:21 Divisions in the church: matters of unity and ministry
- 5:1-6:20 Disorders in the church: moral and legal matters
- 7:1-16:9 Difficulties in the church: Paul's reply to specific questions (7:1a) on marriage and divorce, liberty, women's role, communion, spiritual gifts, resurrection, giving
- 16:10-24 Conclusion

Study Questions

Give short answers to the following questions.

1. What is the Acrocorinth? Why is it important?
