

VCBC SLG Fall Term 2023
The Book of I Corinthians
Lesson #1
Introduction

Why “I Corinthians”?

As familiar as the Book of 1 Corinthians is to most Christians, it remains one of the most important epistles of the Apostle Paul that speaks to the church in all ages. The background and messages of this epistle have such parallels to our days that demand a serious and much thorough study especially given the most unusual final words that he wrote: “If anyone does not love the Lord—a curse be on Him. Come O Lord.” (16:22) Let’s come together to learn and struggle with the Apostle Paul over such practical issues like

- the pursuit of human wisdom without “emptying the power of the cross”,
- the striving for unity in spite of differences within the church,
- the maintenance of moral and spiritual integrity within a pluralistic society,
- the restoration of an awe-inspiring spirit toward worship and
- the instilling of a strong faith in our bodily resurrection and the imminent return of our Lord.

The City of Corinth – Geographical Location

Corinth was an important city located in the Roman province of Achaia (the southern part of modern-day Greece), on a large isthmus (a narrow strip of land that connects two larger landmasses and separates two bodies of water, hence occupying a strategic location and is a natural site for ports and canals linking terrestrial and aquatic trade routes) about 50 miles west of Athens.

Map of Corinth in the Bible



A Bird’s Eye View of Modern-day Isthmus of Corinth



More specifically, the geographical position of Corinth, on the narrow neck of land between the Corinthian Gulf in the west (where the port was Lechaëum) and the Saronic Gulf in the east (and the Port of Cenchrea) guaranteed its commercial prosperity.

The City of Corinth – History, Culture and Religions

Merchants and sailors sent goods across the isthmus rather than risk the long voyage round the rocky, storm-tossed capes at the south of the Peloponnese (the southern peninsula of Greece dominated by the Sparta until 4th century, BC.)

People and Population

While Corinth was totally destroyed by the Roman General, Lucius Mummius Achaicus in 146 BC, it was re-founded a century later as a Roman colony and regained quickly its former glory. As a Roman colony, its inhabitants were, at first, Romans, but eventually great number of Greeks returned together with people from many races, making quite a metropolitan city by the time of Paul.

Thus, it was a city where “Greeks, Latins, Syrians, Asiatic, Egyptians, and Jews bought and sold, labored and revelled, quarrelled and hob-nobbed, in the city and its port, as nowhere else in Greece” (Morris quoting from Moffat, p.xvii).

Of note was a large Jewish population, large enough to have their own synagogue (Acts 18:4), with good archaeological evidence to back up such a fact.

While it is beyond dispute that Corinth was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire in Paul’s era, its actual population was estimated to be somewhere between 500,000 to 700,000, but “it is impossible to say with our present knowledge.” (Morris, 18)

Prosperity

Apart from its population, its wealth is beyond dispute. Being the Capital of the Roman province of Achaia, it boasted the famous Isthmian Games in the region which alternated with the Olympic (thus held every two years). Its idol-worship motif (in honor of the sea god Poseidon) presumably led to its cessation in the 4th century AD, as Christianity grew in its influence.

The land was fertile and was successful in its horticulture, with its grapes coined, “currant”—a word that derives from the name “Corinth”.

It is believed that its prosperity was fanned by three major factors: its geographical location so advantageous for trade, its famous Isthmian Games that drew many visitors, and the presence of thousands of prostitutes (Strabo).

Idol worship and prostitutes

“There were more than a thousand prostitutes connected with the temple of Aphrodite (goddess of sexual love and beauty, identified with Venus by the Romans) in the old Corinth...The goddess could be styled Aphrodite, Kallipygos...Shrines were everywhere erected to ‘Aphrodite the *hetaira*’ (courtesan), as ‘patron of harlots’...this was presumably the reason for the ancient custom in Corinth...whenever the city prays to Aphrodite in matters of grave importance, to invite as many prostitutes as possible to join in the petitions...Dio Chrysostom (1st & 2nd century AD philosopher and historian) speaks of Diogenes (4th century BC) observing large numbers gathering at Corinth because of its harbors and its prostitutes and explains them as ‘city prostitutes’ rather than servants of Aphrodite.” (Morris, 18)

Thus, it is no myth in saying the “Corinth” was synonymous with “licentiousness” at the time of Paul and such was the cultural setting the Corinthian Christians were living in daily.

Combing all of the above, John Parry remarks that: “The ideal of the Corinthian was the reckless development of the individual. The merchant who made his gain by all and every means, the man of pleasure surrendering himself to every lust, the athlete steeled to every bodily exercise and proud in his physical strength, are the true Corinthian types: in a word the man who recognized no superior and no law but his own desires.” (Parry, p. x)

It is interesting to note that it is against such a cultural setting that Paul says, “I wrote to you in my (previous) letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.” (1 Corinthians 5: 9-10)

The Church in Corinth

The founding of the church by Paul is recorded in Acts 18. Since it is covered by only 18 verses, let’s take a look at it:

“After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. 2 There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, 3 and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. 4 Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. 5 When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. 6 But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.’ 7 Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. 8 Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized. 9 One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. 10 For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” 11 So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God. 12

While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment. 13 “This man,” they charged, “is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law.” 14 Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to them, “If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. 15 But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law—settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things.” 16 So he drove them off. 17 Then the crowd there turned on Sosthenes the synagogue leader and beat him in front of the proconsul; and Gallio showed no concern whatever. 18 Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila...”

As Proconsul Gallio reigned between AD 51-53, and Emperor Claudia expelled Jews from Rome in AD 49, most believe that the church of Corinth was found around AD 52.

Before Paul arrived at Corinth, he had a rather eventful, but successful time in Philippi, but were greeted with persecution by the Jews in Thessalonica and Berea. Paul then left for Athens by himself and appeared to have little success with this center of Philosophy. Perhaps, this explains why he says of his ministry to the intellectual Corinthians, saying “I came to you, in weakness and fear and with much trembling.” (I Corinthians 2:3) On the other hand, some opine that the Corinthians were really “intellectual pretenders”, because the Greek philosopher and historian Strabo (1st century, BC) only talks about the city’s statesmen, painters and craftsmen, but does not speak of its philosophers.

While Paul did focus reaching the Jews when Silas and Timothy rejoined him (18:5), he eventually turned to evangelizing the Gentiles (18:6). The contents of the letter, together with “the many Latin names associated with the church in Corinth (such as Lucius, Tertius, Gaius, Erastus, Quartus (Romans 16: 21-23), Titus Justus, Crispus (Acts 18: 7-8), Fortunatus and Achaicus (I Corinthians 16:17)” point to a church made up mainly of Gentiles. Although many opine that the church was made up of people from the lower social strata based on what Paul says of their origin, it appears quite a few were people of substance: Gaius gave hospitality to Paul and “the whole church” (Romans 16:23), Erastus was the “city’s director of public works” (Romans 16:23), they were wealthy enough to be entangled in lawsuits (I Corinthians 6), and discriminated against the poorer ones during the Lord’s Supper without being challenged.

Occasion for the Letter

I Corinthians is an occasional letter, and the reasons for Paul writing this letter can clearly be determined within its contents.

Paul spent a good part of his opening chapters addressing the “divisions” within the church. The apparent reason for their divisions laid in the partisanship based on their adherence to different leaders (preachers) in the church and in this respect, they were pitching Apollos against Paul. From the book of Acts, we have come to know that Apollos came from the very learned city of

Alexandria but came to Christ based merely on the preaching of John's baptism and was later schooled more accurately on the gospel by Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus (Acts 18:26). His ministry in Ephesus was so impressive that the believers gave him a letter of recommendation, sending him to the Province of Achaia (where Corinth was situated). While Paul founded the church in Corinth, it was obvious that Apollos made a further impact in building up the church. While that appeared to have led to partisanship because of their different styles of ministries, the core problem was in fact the rejection of Paul's apostleship all along (chapter 4).

Thus, while writing to warn them against divisions, Paul wrote also to defend his authority as an Apostle (1st four chapters of the letter).

However, even before this current letter, it appears that Paul has already written an earlier letter (5:9—"I wrote you in my letter not to associate with sexual immoral people"), but presumably things in the church got worse, not only in the matter of sexual immorality, but in many other areas that Paul had subsequently heard reports from "Chloe's household" (1:11).

Thus, Paul, based on such reports, writes to address such issues, starting with church divisions and his apostolic authority (**chs. 1-4**), then tolerance of sexual immorality and lawsuits in the church (**chs. 5-6**).

It appears that the church in Corinth did write to Paul (who was in Ephesus) seeking directions or instructions over marital relationships and eating of food already sacrificed to idols—within an extremely challenging cultural and religious context already explained above. To these Paul gives his reply accordingly (in **chs. 7-9**).

However, other reports (likely also received from Chloe's household) about disorderly conduct at church services also gravely concerned Paul and thus he continues to address them which include dispute concerning women's headcover while preaching and disrespectful observance of the Lord's Supper (**ch.11**), and the abuse of the gift of tongue speaking (which Paul uses three chapters—**chs. 12-14**—to build up his arguments).

Throughout the letter, one cannot only sense Paul's intense emotion, but also his acute sense of the soon return of the Lord (saying that "time is short" [7:29], and "For this world in its present form is passing away" [7:31] and his final prayer, "*Maranatha*, i.e., Come, O Lord."). This, perhaps, drives him to burst into a magnificent doctrinal treatise about the bodily resurrection which signifies the final defeat of death and sin for which he yearns (**ch. 15**).

Paul ends his letter (**ch. 16**) with urging the church to help the poor in Jerusalem (likely a one-time donation) and dealing with other personal requests, but in a very surprising way, his final greetings include not just words of blessings, but a curse: "If anyone does not love the Lord—a curse be upon him." (16:22)

While I Corinthians contains many familiar sayings that we cherish, I urge you to read the entire epistle in one sitting with the help of my Outline. Many common questions and interpretations out of context will resolve themselves.