



1 Corinthians - Introduction

Author and Title

The first word of 1 Corinthians states that Paul is its author. There is no good reason to doubt this. The theological concerns of the letter, the energy of its style, its vocabulary, and its historical connections with the other Pauline letters and Acts mark it as Pauline. The traditional title of the letter means that it is the first of two canonical letters by Paul to the Corinthians, not that it was Paul's first letter to them, as will be discussed in 1 Corinthians 5:9.

Date

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from the city of Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia: <<***But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost***>> (1 Corinthians 16:8), and: <<***The churches of Asia send greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, greet you warmly in the Lord***>> (1 Corinthians 16:19), since Ephesus was the main city in the province of Asia. It was written sometime before the final day of Pentecost as just confirmed in 1 Corinthians 16:8 and therefore in springtime. It is unclear whether this was the spring of AD53, 54 or 55. He wrote, in any case, near the end of his three-year ministry in Ephesus: <<***I will visit you after passing through Macedonia – for I intend to pass through Macedonia – and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way, wherever I go. I do not want to see you now just in passing, for I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries***>> (1 Corinthians 16:5-9), and: <<***Now after these things had been accomplished, Paul resolved in the Spirit to go through Macedonia and Achaia, and then to go on to Jerusalem. He said, 'After I have gone there, I must also see Rome.' So he sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he himself stayed for some time longer in Asia***>> (Acts 19:21-22). Corinth was the leading city in the province of Achaia.

Theme

First Corinthians covers a number of topics as recorded in Key Themes. One theme emerges from these discussions, however, as Paul's dominant concern. Paul wanted this church, divided because of the arrogance of its more powerful members, to work together for the advancement of the Gospel. He wanted them to drop their divisive one-upmanship, build up the faith of those who are weak, and witness effectively to unbelievers.

Purpose

Corinth sat on the isthmus connecting the Greek mainland with the Peloponnesian peninsula. This location made it a flourishing crossroads for sea traffic between the Aegean region and the western Mediterranean. It was a place where many cultures and religions mingled. Since it was a Roman colony, Roman law and customs were important, particularly among the upper classes, but **<<many gods and many lords>>**, referred to in 1 Corinthians 8:5, had found a home in Corinth.

The worship of these gods was fully integrated into governmental affairs, civic festivals, trade guilds and social clubs, and everyday life in general. Corinth was also a destination for travelling professional orators who charged a fee for attendance at their entertaining rhetorical displays and advised people on how to advance socially.

Into this milieu Paul brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and soon a church was established. He was aided in his work by two new-found friends from Rome, Priscilla and Aquila, who, like Paul, were displaced Jews and fellow tentmakers: **<<After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found 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, and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together – by trade they were tentmakers. Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks>>** (Acts 18:1-4), **<<Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus>>** (Romans 16:3), and: **<<Greet Prisca and Aquila, and the household of Onesiphorus>>** (2 Timothy 4:19).

Paul, Priscilla and Aquila spent 18 months in Corinth in the early 50s and then, after a brief trip to Judæa and Syria, Paul travelled to Ephesus. Priscilla and Aquila were already there: **<<When they reached Ephesus, he left them there, but first he himself went into the synagogue and had a discussion with the Jews>>** (Acts 18:19), and: **<<The churches of Asia send greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, greet you warmly in the Lord>>** (1 Corinthians 16:19), and, by the time Paul arrived, they had already met the skilful Christian apologist Apollos, who then travelled to and taught in Corinth, as recorded in Acts 18:24-19:1. Apollos is mentioned on several occasions in this letter, especially with regard to the way some followed his teaching.

Paul settled and taught in Ephesus for three years, something he revealed in his farewell speech to the Ephesian elders: **<<Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears>>** (Acts 20:31), and at some point wrote to the Corinthians the otherwise unknown

letter that he refers to in 1 Corinthians 5:9. It is not known what prompted the letter but it dealt with sexual immorality, a persistent problem for the Corinthian church, that Paul returns to again extensively in 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 and 6:12-20.

Sometime later, Paul received an oral report indicating that the Corinthians had not only misunderstood his first letter, but were plagued with serious problems of division, sexual immorality, and social snobbery. Around the same time, a letter arrived from the Corinthians that displayed considerable theological confusion about marriage, divorce, participation in pagan religions, order within corporate worship, and the bodily resurrection of Christians.

In response to these troubling developments, Paul felt compelled to write a substantial letter to Corinth, making the case that much of their conduct was out of step with the Gospel. At the root of their disunity lay an arrogance that was incompatible with God's free gifts to them in Christ: wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. In addition, a self-centred insistence on their own rights at the expense of the weak and marginalised revealed that their own social advancement rather than the Gospel's advancement was their top priority.

At the root of much of the immorality and idolatry in Corinth, moreover, lay a lack of appreciation for the holiness that God requires of his people. Although the particulars of the Mosaic Law were no longer to define the boundaries for God's people: **<<Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything>>** (1 Corinthians 7:19), the law's underlying theme that God's people were to be 'set apart' – a people marked off from their culture – remained in place. In addition, the dwelling of God's Spirit within each believer and the new unity that believers have with the resurrected, living Christ implied that the Corinthians needed to make a clean break from the moral impurity of their culture.

Despite the often stern tone of the letter, Paul was thankful to God for the Corinthians and felt a deep personal affection for them. Because of this love, and for the purpose of God's glory: **<<So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God>>** (1 Corinthians 10:31), Paul wanted the Corinthians to become a well-constructed dwelling place for God's Spirit and to be: **<<blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ>>** (1 Corinthians 1:8b).

The Ancient City of Corinth

The Acrocorinth is a small but steep mountain 1,886 feet or 575m high on the Peloponnesian peninsula in southern Greece. Ancient Corinth was built at the mountain's foot, benefiting also from the natural spring that provided water for the town. In Paul's day Corinth, although a couple of miles inland, oversaw the territory connecting the Adriatic port of Lechaion on the west with the Aegean port of Cenchreæ to the east. Ships were often portaged between these seaports across this narrow stretch of the Peloponnesian isthmus, approximately 3.7 miles or 6km wide at its narrowest. Several rulers in the 1st Century AD foolishly attempted to construct a canal across the isthmus, but this was not successfully accomplished until the 19th Century.

The famed Greek city of Corinth, renowned for its artistry in bronze, its wealth, and its wanton sexuality, was destroyed in 146BC during a war with Rome. The city

was re-founded as a Roman colony in 44BC by Roman freedmen, and the distinct archaeological strata in the city centre testify to this gap in its history. Inscriptions from the first one hundred years of the new colony were mostly in Latin, although strong marks of Greek culture were also evident in the art and life of the city.

First Century Corinth followed a Roman city plan based on a rectangular grid. Typical urban structures were built or reconstructed, such as shops, stoas, basilicas, a bouleuterion used for the city council meetings, a gymnasium, baths, public toilets, and a theatre. A few large houses from this period have also been excavated. The centre of town boasted the refashioned Peirene Fountain as a pleasant place from which to draw spring water. To this day a raised speaker's platform stands in the main forum, and a nearby inscription refers to this platform as the rostra, equivalent to a *bēma* or tribunal; this is probably the very location where Gallio judged Paul to be innocent, refer to Acts 18:12-17. Some other significant archaeological remains date from post-NT times, such as the odeion, a small covered theatre.

In Paul's day the great Doric-style temple, dedicated to Athena or Apollo, from the 6th Century BC remained a central feature in Corinth, and multiple temples to other deities dotted the city. Indeed, when the author Pausanias wrote about Corinth in the mid-2nd Century AD, his description of the city read like a tour guide of pagan monumental sacred sites. Corinth boasted an important sanctuary of Asklepios, the god of healing, where people would come to offer sacrifices to the god and to seek medical care.

Marks of the imperial cult were evident, especially if some are correct in identifying the substantial Temple E as being dedicated to Augustus' sister Octavia, although it may have been for Jupiter.

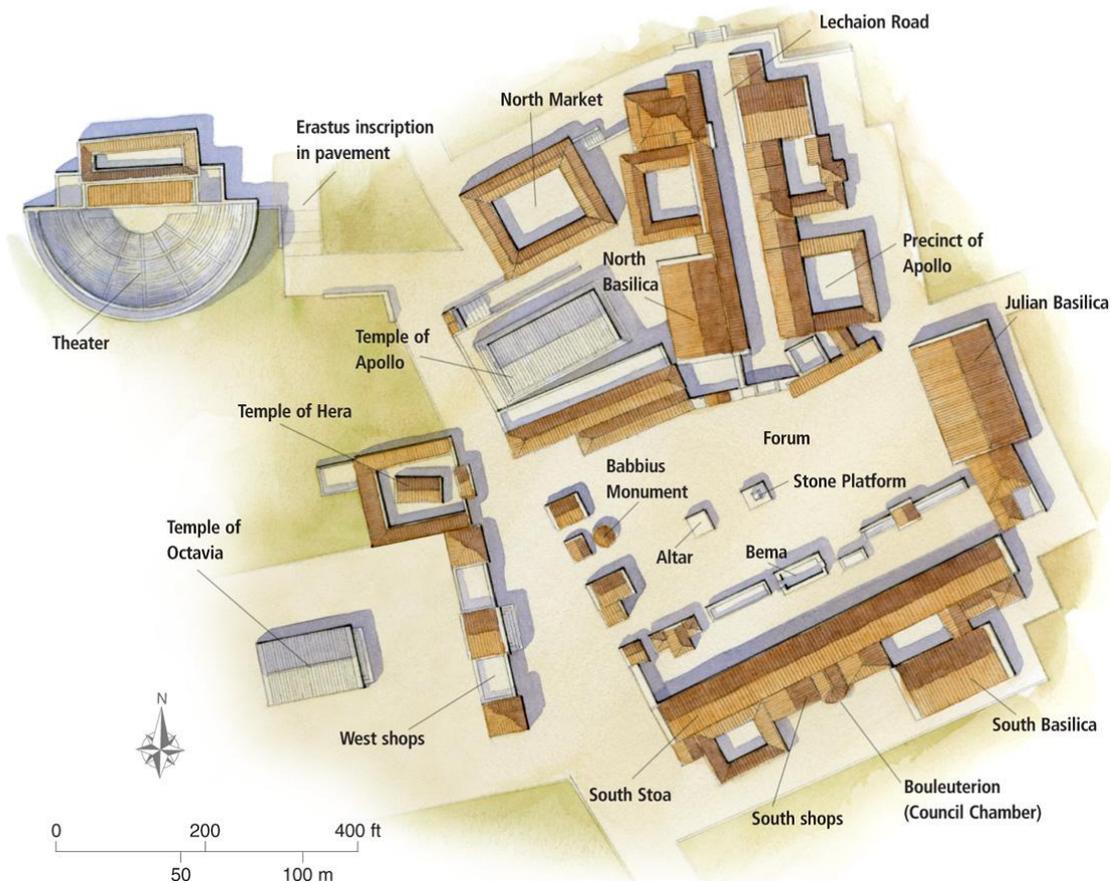
The famous Hellenistic-era temple of Aphrodite atop the Acrocorinth had been rebuilt as a rather small structure during the 1st Century AD. Scholars debate whether Strabo's account of 1,000 temple prostitutes refers to the earlier Hellenistic temple of Aphrodite or to the Roman one of Paul's day; the former seems more probable (Strabo, Geography 8.6.20c). In any case, in Roman times, wanton sexuality would have been common at such a port city.

For other important archaeological features refer to comments made on 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, i.e. the Isthmian games, 8:1-11:1 referring to the meat market, Acts 18:4 for the synagogue and Judaism, and Romans 16:23 for the inscription relating to Erastus.

Corinth in the Time of Paul (circa AD60)

The city plan shows those features of the city of Corinth that archaeologists have so far identified as dating from the time of Paul. Others remain to be discovered by future archaeological excavations.

CORINTH IN THE TIME OF PAUL (C. A.D. 60)



Key Themes

Theme

- 1 Since the church is the dwelling place of God's Spirit, the people who make up the church should work for unity by building each other up.
- 2 Christians should build up the church in four practical ways:
 - a They should be sensitive to those of fragile faith.
 - b They should win unbelievers through culturally sensitive evangelism.
 - c They should conduct worship services in such a way that unbelievers present might come to faith.
 - d Their corporate worship should use spiritual gifts not for personal display, or evaluating who has a better gift, but to build up the church.

Verses

- 1:10-4:21, especially 3:10-16 and 14:12.
- 8:1-9:18; 10:28; 10:33.
- 9:19-23; 10:27; 10:32-33.
- 14:16; 14:23-25.
- 11:2-16; 12:12-30; 14:1-35.

- 3 Sexual relations form a union between man and woman as profound as the union of the believer with Christ, and so sexual activity should be confined to marriage. 5:1-13; 6:12-20; 7:5; 7:9; 7:36.
- 4 Baptism and the Lord's Supper are important, but both are subordinate to personal trust in the Gospel and to living in the way that God commands. 1:14-17; 10:1-5; 11:17-34; 15:29-34.
- 5 The bodily resurrection of Jesus and of his followers from the dead is a critical component of Christian faith and practice. 6:14; 15:1-58.

Summary of Salvation History

Christians are God's own people, the family of God, the body of Christ, refer to 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, and the temple of the Holy Spirit (3:16). As those who fulfil the OT pattern for the people of God, they are to be a holy community (1:2), reflecting God's character: <<***Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'***>> (1 Peter 1:15-16).

Writing Style

First Corinthians is a pastoral letter to a spiritually troubled church. Like other NT Epistles, it is an occasional letter, and one can quite readily piece together the things that occasioned it by noting signals in the text. The letter is highly relevant today, as it deals with such issues as the relationship between Christians and their surrounding pagan culture, divisions within the church, the ordering of church practices such as the Lord's Supper, and the use of spiritual gifts. The letter also deals with matters of personal morality, such as sex, marriage, celibacy, and the virtues, especially love.

First Corinthians follows the form of a typical 1st Century epistle, although its content is governed by the specific situation in the Corinthian church. For example, the usual epistolary elements of salutation, thanksgiving, and parænesis, a set of moral exhortations, receive scant treatment. The body of the letter is taken up with situations and questions from the Corinthian church that Paul addresses, and the epistolary close in Chapter 16 is extensive because of business Paul has with the church. The rhetorical modes of exhortation and instruction dominate the letter. Chapter 13 is an encomium, a written tribute, in praise of love.

The book makes extensive use of rhetorical techniques such as contrast, repetition, and analogy. It draws sharp contrasts between truth and error, and between moral good and evil. Because Paul regards the Corinthian Christians as being out of line in a number of areas, the letter exhibits a strong corrective tone.

The Setting of 1 Corinthians (circa AD53-55)

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians during his third missionary journey, near to the end of his three-year ministry in Ephesus. Both Corinth and Ephesus were wealthy port cities steeped in pagan idolatry and philosophy. Corinth benefited both militarily and

economically from its strategic location at one end of the isthmus that connected the southern Greek peninsula to the mainland.



Outline

- I. Salutation (1:1-9)
 - a. Greeting: apostleship, sanctity, and unity (1:1-3)
 - b. Thanksgiving: speech, knowledge, and spiritual gifts (1:4-9)
- II. Divisions over Christian Preachers (1:10-4:21)
 - a. Division of the church (1:10-17)
 - b. God's wisdom answers the problem (1:18-4:21)
 - i. The nature of God's wisdom (1:18-2:16)
 1. Christ the Power and Wisdom of God (1:18-31)
 2. Proclaiming Christ Crucified (2:1-5)
 3. The True Wisdom of God (2:6-16)

- ii. God's wisdom applied to Apollos, Paul, and the Corinthians (3:1-4:21)
 - 1. On Divisions in the Corinthian Church (3:1-22)
 - 2. The Ministry of the Apostles (4:1-13)
 - 3. Fatherly Admonition (4:14-21)
- III. A Report of Sexual Immorality and Legal Wrangling (5:1-6:20)
 - a. Incest, arrogance, and the need for discipline (5:1-13)
 - i. Sexual Immorality Defiles the Church (5:1-8)
 - ii. Sexual Immorality Must Be Judged (5:9-13)
 - b. Lawsuits among Believers (6:1-11)
 - c. Glorify God in Body and Spirit (6:12-20)
- IV. Three Issues from a Corinthian Letter (7:1-11:1)
 - a. Marriage, divorce, and unchangeable circumstances (7:1-24)
 - i. Directions concerning Marriage (7:1-16)
 - ii. The Life That the Lord Has Assigned (7:17-24)
 - b. The Unmarried and the Widows (7:25-40)
 - c. Sensitivity towards those of fragile faith (8:1-11:1)
 - i. Food Offered to Idols (8:1-13)
 - ii. The Rights of an Apostle (9:1-27)
 - iii. Warnings from Israel's History (10:1-22)
 - iv. Do All to the Glory of God (10:23-11:1)
- V. Divisions over Corporate Worship (11:2-14:40)
 - a. Head Coverings (11:2-16)
 - b. Social snobbery at the Lord's Table (11:17-34)
 - i. Abuses at the Lord's Supper (11:17-22)
 - ii. The Institution of the Lord's Supper (11:23-26)
 - iii. Partaking of the Supper Unworthily (11:27-34)

- c. Elevating one spiritual gift above others (12:1-14:40)
 - i. Spiritual Gifts (12:1-11)
 - ii. One Body with Many Members (12:12-31)
 - iii. The Gift of Love (13:1-13)
 - iv. Gifts of Prophecy and Tongues (14:1-25)
 - v. Orderly Worship (14:26-40)
- VI. The Futility of Faith If the Dead Are Not Raised (15:1-58)
 - a. The Resurrection of Christ (15:1-11)
 - b. The Resurrection of the Dead (15:12-34)
 - c. The Resurrection Body (15:35-58)
- VII. The Collection for the Saints and Travel Plans (16:1-12)
 - a. The Collection for the Saints (16:1-4)
 - b. Plans for Travel (16:5-12)
- VIII. Final Messages and Greetings (16:13-24)