

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

(SB_1Cor_Introduction)

INTRODUCTION

Historical and Religious Background of the City of Corinth¹

The city of Corinth was situated on an isthmus that at its narrowest point was about three and a half miles from the Saronic Gulf to the east and the Gulf of Corinth to the west. To the south is the large and otherwise isolated Peloponnesus and to the north is the mainland known as Greece today. Corinth is situated about 50 miles from Athens.

The city was built on the north side of a large rock or small mountain that rises to about 1900 feet above the plain below where Corinth is situated. This small mountain was named Acrocorinthus and served as a citadel for the Corinthians since it had an inexhaustible water supply from a fountain that was located there.

In 146 B.C., the city was destroyed by the Roman army under the leadership of Lucius Mummius for having played a leading role in the revolt of the alliance known as the Achaian League against Rome. The population of the city was sold into slavery. It lay in ruins for 100 years until Julius Caesar re-founded the city as a Roman colony (46 B.C.). In 27 B.C., it became the governmental seat for Achaia and remained as such through Paul’s day.

As a Roman colony, its citizenry probably consisted of freedmen from Italy, but the population was augmented to a significant degree by Greeks and Levantines (people from the Levant, an imprecise region that encompasses a portion of the Fertile Crescent that covers Palestine). This latter group included a considerable Jewish contingent – a fact evidenced by the presence of a synagogue which has been documented with extra-biblical evidence.

Due to the city’s strategic location, it quickly regained its prosperity. It also regained a well-documented reputation for licentious activities. For instance, in Homer’s *Iliad*, the city is linked to wealth and licentiousness. Plato called a prostitute “a Corinthian girl.” Philetaerus, a playwright, named a burlesque play using a derivative from the Greek word for Corinth. Aristophanes coined the verb *korinthiazomai* to refer to fornication.

All of these references allude to the strong influence that the worship practices associated with various gods wielded in relation to the lifestyles of its citizens.

It [*Corinth*] was a centre of the worship of **Aphrodite**, whose temple crowned the Acrocorinthus. Her cult statue was attired in the armour of the war-god **Ares**, with his helmet for a foot-rest and his shield for a mirror. At the foot of the citadel stood the temple of **Melicertes**, principal deity of Tyre. The Isthmian Games, over which Corinth presided, and in which all the Greek city-states participated, were held every two years; at them the sea-god **Poseidon** was specially honoured. Corinth paid respect, in Paul’s words, to “many ‘gods’ and many

¹ Sources consulted for the information in this introduction include Thomas Constable, “Notes on 1 Corinthians” at www.sonlight.com; F.F. Bruce, *Paul – Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: The Paternoster Press, Ltd., 1977, reprinted 1996), 248-251; David K. Lowery, “1 Corinthians,” in John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, general editors, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, a division of Scripture Press, 1983), 505-506.

'lords'" (1 Corinthians 8:5).² [*Bolded & italicized words are mine for emphasis or explanation*].

It is estimated that as many as 1000 temple prostitutes were affiliated with the worship rituals surrounding Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love (the Roman counterpart – Venus).³ This fact was perhaps the biggest contributor to Corinth's reputation and made it a tourist attraction and contributed significantly to the local economy.

Aphrodite had a festival of her own, the *Aphrodisiac* (also referred to as *Aphrodisia*), which was celebrated all over Greece but particularly in Athens and Corinth. At the temple of Aphrodite on the summit of Acrocorinth (before the Roman destruction of the city in 146 BC) intercourse with her priestesses was considered a method of worshiping Aphrodite. This temple was not rebuilt when the city was reestablished under Roman rule in 44 BC, but it is likely that the fertility rituals continued in the main city near the agora. Aphrodite was associated with, and often depicted with the sea, dolphins, doves, swans, pomegranates, apples, myrtle, rose and lime trees, clams, scallop shells and pearls, but the swine was prohibited.⁴

Circumstances Surrounding Paul's Arrival in Corinth

We can imagine Paul's state of mind as he traveled to Corinth given all that had preceded his arrival there. He probably wrestled with some mental contradictions between all that he was experiencing and that which he knew was God's will for his life. After receiving direction from the Lord in the form of a vision of a Macedonian man while Paul was at Troas in Asia Minor on the east side of the Aegean Sea (Acts 16:6-10), it had probably not been Paul's expectations that he would be forced to turn south into Achaia once he entered Macedonia. However, after receiving this initial direction from the Lord, each city he entered seemed to harbor much opposition and even persecution.

His preaching and teaching in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea resulted in small groups of converts, but certainly did not result in "success" as the world would measure "success," e.g. large numbers of converts, warm embrace of Paul, wide acceptance of his message, lavish provisions poured out upon this servant of God, large numbers of buildings being erected, etc. Instead, Paul was beaten and jailed in Philippi and chased out of Thessalonica and Berea by the Judaizers (see Acts 16:11-17:15). In Athens, Paul was considered more of an amusement to be used by the intelligentsia and philosophers than taken seriously (Acts 17:16-34). In a sense, Paul's experience in Athens was much less encouraging than Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. At least the reactions he faced in those cities showed that some impact had occurred.

So, when Paul arrived in Corinth, by his own testimony, he indicated that he arrived with much fear and trembling (1 Cor 2:3). Paul had no reason to suppose that Corinth would prove any different than his experience with the other cities during his 2nd Missionary Journey. Paul understood the city's reputation. It was probably for this reason that the Lord reached out to Paul and gave him assurance in a vision shortly after he arrived in Corinth.

9 And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; 10 for I am with you, and no man will

² Bruce, *Paul*, 249. Paul made reference to the Isthmian Games in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. The bema (a judgment seat or platform) was also located in Corinth and the site from which important cases were tried including Paul (Acts 18:12).

³ Bruce, *Paul*, 250.

⁴ From Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aphrodite>

attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." (Acts 18:9-10)

In the end, Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth (A.D. 51-52) – a longer time than he had spent in any city since he and Barnabas had gone their separate ways from Syrian Antioch. When Paul departed Corinth eighteen months later, there was a large and vigorous (albeit volatile) assembly of believers in Corinth.

Priscilla and Aquila

While in Corinth, Paul continued his regular practice of supporting himself by his own manual labor as a tent-maker. As such, he came to be employed by a Jew who was originally from Pontus named Aquila and his wife, Priscilla. Aquila and Priscilla had been residents of Rome, but they had left Rome because of Claudius' edict which expelled Jews from Rome (ca. A.D. 49). This couple was evidently a fairly well-to-do couple and their business model allowed them to travel between Rome, Corinth and Ephesus. In none of Paul's references to this couple is it suggested that they were his converts. Therefore, it is quite likely that they were already believers. After their experience in Corinth together, Paul had no more loyal friends, supporters and helpers than this couple.

Paul's First Converts in Corinth

As was his custom, Paul attended the Sabbath services in the local synagogue for several weeks and argued that Jesus was the fulfillment of Hebrew prophecies (Acts 18:4-5). A number of Jews and God-fearing Gentiles were persuaded by his preaching. Among the Jews who were persuaded included Crispus, a ruler of the synagogue (Acts 18:8; 1 Cor 1:15), and among the Gentiles who were persuaded included a Gentile who had a house next door to the synagogue named Titius Justus (perhaps also known as Gaius who Paul described as a host to him and the whole church – Romans 16:23 cf. Acts 18:7). In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul singles out Crispus, Gaius and a Stephanas and his family as the "firstfruits of Achaia" and as the only ones of his Corinthian converts whom he personally baptized.

After his first few weeks in Corinth, Silas and Timothy rejoined Paul (Acts 18:5) and they may have brought with them a monetary gift from the believers in Macedonia that allowed Paul to discontinue tent-making for a period of time and devote himself to preaching and teaching (cf. 2 Cor 11:9).

Eventually, the time came in Corinth (as it did almost everywhere Paul traveled) that the unbelieving Jewish authorities decided that they had enough and they refused Paul the right to use the synagogue. Paul's friend and Gentile convert, Titius Justus, allowed Paul to use his house as a meeting place. From this small house in a city of thousands, the number of converts continued to grow and include not only Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, but "pagans" (Gentile unbelievers who had not been associated with or familiar with the God of the Jews).

Among this latter group (Gentile "pagans"), some of the converts included Erastus of Corinth. Erastus was one of Paul's helpers and friends who is mentioned in association with Paul's host, Titius Justus, in Romans 16:23 and is described there as the city treasurer. The name Erastus appears in connection with Paul in several passages (Acts 19:22; 2 Tim 4:20).

Gallio's Judgment (Acts 18:12-17)

In July of A.D. 51, Lucius Junius Gallio arrived in Corinth to begin his appointment as proconsul of Achaia. Gallio belonged to a well-known Roman family of Spanish origin. Gallio

was a nephew of the tutor to the future Emperor Nero.⁵ Soon after Gallio arrived in Corinth, the unbelieving Jews sought to use the opportunity to charge Paul with propagating an illegal religion. Gallio quickly recognized that Paul was Jewish as was his accusers and Gallio concluded that this was simply a quarrel between Jews (a recognized and protected religion under Roman law) over points of theology. Before Paul could even speak his prepared defense, Gallio dismissed the tribunal. The word for "judgment seat" used in Acts 18:12 is the Greek word Bema and is the same word used of Pilate's tribunal at Jerusalem from which the death sentence was pronounced on Jesus (Jn 19:13) and the tribunal of Festus at Caesarea (Acts 25:6) which Paul recognized as Caesar's tribunal (Acts 25:10) just prior to appealing to Caesar.

Gallio's dismissal of the charges in such a manner was seen as a snub administered to the unbelieving Jewish leaders and the Corinthian bystanders seized the opportunity to assault the ruler of the synagogue, Sosthenes, while Gallio paid no attention to the matter (Acts 18:17). Evidently, Sosthenes became a believer since Paul mentions a Sosthenes in the opening of his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:1).

Circumstances Surrounding Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians

After about 18 months of ministry in Corinth, Paul departed and took Priscilla and Aquila with him to Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19) and after a very short stay in Ephesus, Paul proceeded on to Syrian Antioch by way of Caesarea and then to Jerusalem.

Paul returned to Ephesus on his third journey and made that city his base of operations for almost three years (A.D. 53-56). There he heard disturbing news about immorality in the Corinthian church. Paul wrote a letter to the believers in Corinth in order to address this issue that would compromise and nullify the testimony of believers there. Paul referred to this letter as his "former letter" (1 Cor. 5:9). We do not have a copy of this letter.

Some time later, Paul received a report from "Chloe's people" that factions had developed in the church. He also received a letter from the church in Corinth requesting his guidance in certain matters. These matters were marriage, divorce, food offered to idols, the exercise of spiritual gifts in the church, and the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem. Those who carried this letter also reported other disturbing conditions in the church. These conditions were the condoning rather than disciplining of immorality, Christians suing one another in the pagan courts, and disorders in their church meetings.

All of these factors led Paul to compose another letter, "1 Corinthians." In this letter, Paul addresses these issues, promised to visit them soon, and said he was sending Timothy to Corinth (chapters 1-4). He dealt next with the oral reports (chapters 5-6) and then with the questions that the Corinthian believers had written to him (chapters 7-16). He evidently sent this epistle from Ephesus by trusted messengers in the late winter or early spring of A.D. 56 (cf. 16:8).

One of the larger problems with which Paul dealt was that some in the community were leading the church into a view of things that was contrary to that of Paul. This resulted in a questioning of Paul's authority and his gospel. The key issue between Paul and the Corinthians was what it means to be "spiritual."

⁵ See Bruce, *Paul*, 253. Actually, Lucius Junius Gallio's was originally named Marcus Annaeus Novatus. His father was Marcus Annaeus Seneca whose older brother, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, was a professor of rhetoric and a Stoic philosopher who was the tutor of the future Emperor Nero.