

God's People in Corinth

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Passage: “And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.’” (Acts 18:9-10, ESV).

Purpose Statement: Reconstruct the historical setting of Paul's letters to the Corinthians.

Introduction: The ancient city of Corinth is an important location in New Testament studies.¹ Its history is obscure until the early 8th-century b.c. when the city-state of Corinth began to develop as a commercial center.² Corinth's independence ended in 338 b.c. when it came under Macedonian control. It came into conflict with Rome and was destroyed by the Roman consul Lucius Mummius in 146 b.c. Its citizens were killed or sold into slavery. Corinth lay in ruins for one hundred years until it was refounded in 44 b.c. by Julius Caesar as a Roman colony.³ The new Corinth flourished and became the administrative capital of the Roman province of Achaia in 27 b.c.⁴

Corinth was a strategic juncture for commerce and travel, located 48 miles west of Athens on a narrow isthmus between the Aegean and Adriatic Seas. The remains of the ancient city of Corinth lie just north of Acrocorinth.⁵ Corinth had harbors on the two gulfs that surrounded it: (1) Lechaenum on the Gulf of Corinth (two miles to the northwest) and (2) Cenchreae on the Saronic Gulf (six miles to the southeast).⁶ Because the voyage around the southern tip of Greece (Peloponnesus peninsula) was dangerous, many ships were carried or dragged on rollers on a five-mile stone roadway (*diolkos*) between the Corinthian and Saronic gulfs across the isthmus and put to sea again.⁷

¹ Its history goes back to before 3000 bc, when it was first occupied by Neolithic and Early Bronze Age settlers. With the addition of metallurgy, the Neolithic morphed into the Bronze Age, which was succeeded by the Iron Age.

² The chief source of Corinth's wealth was its possession of the isthmus, which controlled: (1) The land traffic between the Attica Peninsula (where Athens is located) and the Peloponnese; and (2) The sea traffic between the Aegean and Ionian seas by way of the Corinthian and Saronic gulfs.

³ After 44 bc, Corinth was repopulated by freedmen from Rome and Roman government officials and businessmen. It was also made up of local Greeks and orientals, including a large number of Jews.

⁴ Modern Corinth, three miles northeast of the site of ancient Corinth, near the gulf, was founded in 1858 after the ancient site was abandoned because of a severe earthquake.

⁵ Acrocorinth is the acropolis (*acro*=summit + *polis* = city) of Corinth. It is a monolithic rock overseeing the ancient city of Corinth. It rose about 1,800 feet into the southern sky.

⁶ The city was connected with its principal port, Lechaenum. Immediately behind the south stoa began the road leading to the city's other port of Cenchreae, on the Saronic Gulf.

⁷ Several attempts to build a canal were unsuccessful. Periander the tyrant (c. 625–585 b.c.), who built the *diolkos* across the isthmus for the transfer of ships and cargo, planned to breach the isthmus. Emperor Nero began the project, but a canal was not completed until 1893.

Historians estimate that Corinth had between fifty and one hundred thousand residents in the mid-first century a.d. Its diverse population consisted of retired soldiers, freedmen from Rome, Jewish merchants, Greeks, Egyptians, Parthians, Syrians, Asians, Ethiopians, etc. Thousands of artisans and slaves made up the bulk of the population. Only 2-5% were wealthy, while 95% lived in abject poverty. The wealthy lived in *villas* (typically country Roman houses for wealthy people built in the times of the Republic and the Empire), while the poor lived in *insulae* (multi-level apartment dwellings crammed together in several parts of town that provided housing for the bulk of the urban populace). Estimates are that in these parts there was an average of 137 persons per acre. Streets were narrow and sanitation deplorable. Excrements were poured onto the streets from chamber pots. Orphaned children ran loose on the streets. Older people sat on the corner of the streets begging.

Greek was the language on the streets, while Latin was the language in public spaces (courts). Corinth was a religious city, with temples, shrines and altars dotting the city. Prostitution and sexual immorality also flourished. The priestesses of the temple of Aphrodite on Acrocorinth, known as the *hierodouloi* ("sacred slaves"), engaged in prostitution. The Isthmian Games⁸ held in Corinth ranked second only to the Olympics. The outdoor theater accommodated twenty thousand people. Corinth has a hot, Mediterranean summer climate from June to September. The coldest month is typically January. The wettest month in Corinth is December and the driest month is August.

Two of Paul's letters in the New Testament were addressed to Christians in Corinth.⁹ Luke dedicated a whole chapter in the book of Acts to the formation of the Christian church in Corinth. Paul spent over a year in this city on his first visit (Acts 18:1-18a). To better appreciate his need to write 1 Corinthians and the issues he addressed, it is important to understand the city itself, the people involved in the church's early stages of growth, and the sequence of events that led to Paul's writing this important New Testament epistle.

Body:

- I. Several **key people** played crucial roles in the establishment of the Christian presence in Corinth.
 - a. **Paul**, who was called by God to preach Jesus "among the Gentiles" (Gal 1:15), is presented by Luke as playing a prominent part in the establishment of the church in Corinth.
 - i. He describes himself as having planted the community (1 Cor. 3:6) or having laid its foundation (3:10).

⁸ These Panhellenic games were held once every two years. They attracted large crowds of foreigners and generated revenue for the city.

⁹ Paul wrote at least three letters to the Corinthians, but one was not preserved among the New Testament writings (1 Cor 5:9).

- ii. Paul claims to be the Corinthians' "father in Christ Jesus" (4:15).
- iii. Paul and his associates "were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ" (2 Cor 10:14).
- b. **Silas** and **Timothy** were Paul's missionary companions who stayed in Macedonia when Paul left for Athens (Acts 17:14). They reconnected with Paul in Corinth and assisted Paul in preaching Jesus in Corinth (Acts 18:5).
- c. **Aquila and Priscilla**, who also played key roles in the formation of the Christian church in Corinth, came from Rome to Corinth, where they met Paul.¹⁰
 - i. Like Paul, they were tentmakers; Paul lived and worked with them in Corinth (Acts 18:2-3).
 - ii. They were in Ephesus when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. They sent greetings together with "the church that meets at their house" (1 Cor. 16:19).
 - iii. Years later, when Paul wrote Romans from Corinth, Priscilla and Aquila were back in Rome and again had a church in their home (Rom. 16:3, 5).
- d. **Apollos** was a Christian from Alexandria, "an eloquent man" (Acts 18:24), who met Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus.
 - i. After hearing Apollos in the synagogue, Priscilla and Aquila "explained to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26).
 - ii. Apollos became a spiritual leader among the followers of Jesus in Corinth (Acts 18:27–19:1a).
 - iii. Apollos returned to Ephesus after some time in Corinth and was with Paul when he wrote this letter (1 Cor 16:12).
 - iv. Believers in Corinth may have contrasted Apollos' eloquence with the fact that Paul did not preach to them in "lofty speech or wisdom," but rather in "weakness and trembling" (1 Cor 2:1-3).
- e. **Crispus** was a leader of the Jewish synagogue in Corinth who became a follower of Jesus, "together with his entire household" (Acts 18:8). He was one of the few believers in Corinth who were baptized by Paul himself (1 Cor 1:14).
- f. **Titius Justus** was a Roman whose house was next door to the Jewish synagogue in Corinth.

¹⁰ Luke doesn't make it clear whether they were followers of Jesus prior to this encounter with Paul.

- i. He was attracted to the Jewish religion, “a worshiper of God” (Acts 18:7).
 - ii. He hosted the gathering of Jesus’ followers in Corinth after Paul was no longer welcome in the Jewish synagogue.
- g. **Galio** was the proconsul (governor) of Achaia¹¹ during Paul’s “year and six months” stay in Corinth (Acts 18:11-12a).
 - i. He comes across as having disdain for Jews; when he received charges against Paul from local Jews, he dismissed the case, seeing it merely as a religious dispute among Jews with no bearing on Roman civil law (Acts 18:12-17).
 - ii. For him, Paul’s group was a faction of Judaism, a religion still sanctioned by Roman law. It could be propagated freely unless it occasioned public disorder.
- h. **Stephanus**, along with his household, was among the first converts to Jesus in Corinth (1 Cor 16:15).
 - i. Paul baptized the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 1:16).
 - ii. He, along with Fortunatus and Achaicus, was probably the deliverer of the Corinthians’ letter to Paul in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:16-18; cf 7:1).
- i. **Gaius** was a disciple of Jesus in Corinth who was baptized by Paul (1 Cor 1:14) and later hosted one of the churches of Corinth in his house (Rom 16:23).
- j. **Erastus** was a city official of Corinth who became a disciple and eventually a part of Paul’s mission team (Rom. 16:23; Acts 19:22; 2 Tim. 4:20).
 - i. He was wealthy enough to fund and dedicate a costly public pavement for the city.
 - ii. An inscription found in the city reads, “Erastus, for his aedileship, constructed [this pavement] at his own expense.”
- k. **Sosthenes** was a synagogue leader in Corinth (Acts 18:17), possibly the one who replaced Crispus.
 - i. He was beaten by a crowd after Galio refused to take action against Paul (Acts 18:17).
 - ii. He may have become a follower of Jesus afterward since he is mentioned as one of Paul’s cowriters to the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:1).

¹¹ A Roman province that included the Peloponnesus Peninsula, much of central Greece, and the Cyclades islands.

- II. A comparison of Luke's record in Acts with several of Paul's letters provides **a sequence of events** leading up to and following Paul's letters to the Corinthians.
- a. Paul arrived alone in Corinth from Athens (Acts 18:1), where he had little success, around the time Jews had been commanded to leave Rome (49 a.d.).¹²
 - i. Aquilla and Priscilla migrated to Corinth from Rome (Acts 18:2).
 - ii. Silas and Timothy arrived in Corinth sometime after Paul (Acts 18:5a)
 - b. During Paul's one-and-a-half years in Corinth (Acts 18:11), "many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized" (Acts 18:8).
 - i. Gallio's arrival in the city as proconsul of Achaia happened around 51 a.d.
 - ii. Most scholars agree that Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians from Corinth.
 - c. Paul left Corinth by ship, crossing the Aegean with Aquila and Priscilla, and began ministry in Ephesus (Acts 18:19).
 - d. Paul left Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus while he headed for Jerusalem (Acts 18:21). He soon went to Antioch and shortly after that returned to Ephesus (19:1b).
 - e. Parallel to Paul being gone from Corinth, Apollos worked there (Acts 18:24–19:1a; cf 1 Cor 3:6).
 - i. After Paul left Ephesus to go to Jerusalem, a Jewish believer named Apollos came from Alexandria to Ephesus (Acts 18:24).
 - ii. He was speaking about Jesus in the Jewish synagogue when Priscilla and Aquila met him (Acts 18:26).
 - iii. Priscilla and Aquila "took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately."
 - iv. Apollos decided to "cross to Achaia." The Christians at Ephesus "wrote the disciples [in Corinth] to welcome him" (Acts 18:27).
 - v. "When he arrived [in Corinth], he greatly helped" the believers.
 - vi. "...while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul" returned to Ephesus (Acts 19:1).
 - f. Paul spent two and a half years of fruitful ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:10).

¹² What is known of Emperor Claudius ordering the expulsion of the Jews from Rome is found in the writings of the Roman historian Suetonius.

- i. At some point, Paul sent Timothy back to Corinth (1 Cor 4:17).¹³
 - ii. Prior to writing 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:9), warning them, among other things, “not to associate with sexually immoral people.”
 - iii. While still in Ephesus, Paul received a report from “Chloe’s people” (1 Cor 1:11; cf 5:1; 11:18).
 - iv. The Corinthians also wrote to Paul (7:1a) asking for his advice about several things. This letter was most like sent through Stephanus.
- g. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus and sent it through Stephanus (1 Cor 16:8, 16-18).
 - i. By the time Paul wrote to 1 Corinthians, Apollos had returned to Ephesus (1 Cor 16:12).
 - ii. Paul intended to visit the Corinthians at some point in the future (11:34b; 16:7), but was in no hurry because in Ephesus “a great door for effective work” had been opened (1 Cor 16:9).
 - iii. His plan was “to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, ‘After I have been there, I must also see Rome’” (Acts 19:21).
- h. Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthians while still in Ephesus.
- i. Paul “sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus” (Acts 19:22).
- j. Paul departed for Macedonia and Greece (Acts 20:1-2).
- k. During his three months in Corinth (Acts 20:3), Paul wrote his letter to the Romans (Rom 16:23).
- l. In about the year 97, Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the church. It reveals that the community was still vexed by many of the same problems about which Paul had written to them.

¹³ Timothy seems to have been sent ahead of, rather than with Paul’s letter (1 Corinthians). By the time they receive this letter, Paul intends to send Timothy to them a second time (16:10-11).

III. Paul's letters to the Corinthians are not theological treatises, but occasional letters rooted in **missional circumstances** surrounding Jesus' followers in Corinth.¹⁴

- a. Paul wrote this letter in response to information he received from "Chloe's household" (1 Cor 1:11; cf 5:1; 11:18).
 - i. Paul heard that there was serious dissension within the community;
 - ii. sexual immorality (5:1–8; 6:12–20);
 - iii. legal disputes among believers (6:1–11);
 - iv. abuses of the Lord's Supper (11:17–34); and
 - v. controversies about the resurrection of the dead (15:1–58).
- b. Paul was also responding to questions he received from the Corinthians in a letter they wrote him (1 Cor 7:1):
 - i. Some of their questions were regarding sex within marriage (7:1b–40);
 - ii. eating meat that had been offered to idols (8:1–11:1);
 - iii. spiritual gifts in the community's worship (12:1–14:40); and
 - iv. Paul's collection for Jerusalem (16:1–4).
- c. Some of the tensions in the community were between the well-to-do and the poor (1 Cor 11:17–34).
- d. There was **incredible diversity** among Jesus' followers in Corinth.
 - i. Paul points out that among the Corinthian Christians, there were Jews, Greeks, slaves, free, etc. (1 Cor 12:13).
 - ii. Among the Jews were Aquila, Priscilla and Crispus.
 - iii. There were Romans such as Fortunatus, Quartus, Gaius, and Titius Justus.
 - iv. There were wealthier members like Gaius, Stephanus, Titius Justus and Erastus.
 - v. There were Greeks such as Stephanas, Achaicus and Erastus.
 - vi. The bulk of the congregation was made up of non-elite, poorer members of society (1 Cor 1:26).

¹⁴ Even Paul's famous love chapter (1 Cor 13) is a crucial piece of Paul's overall purpose of unifying a church that was fragmenting (1:10). Towards the end, he urges its members to "let all that you do be done in love" (1 Cor 16:14). Read in context, 1 Corinthians 13 addresses the problem of the failure to love those within the church who lack certain societal status indicators, such as wealth, knowledge and wisdom.

- vii. The way Paul speaks of their former way of life suggests that the bulk of the congregation was non-Jewish (6:10–11; 8:7; 12:2).
 - viii. There was more than one gathering of Jesus' followers in Corinth of varying sizes.
- IV. In the thanksgiving portion of his introduction (1:4-9),¹⁵ Paul says that the Corinthians “were called into the *fellowship* [*koinōnia*] of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (vs 9).¹⁶
- a. The Greek noun *κοινωνία* (*koinōnia*) means “close association involving mutual interests and sharing, association, communion, fellowship, close relationship.”¹⁷
 - i. John invited Jesus' disciples to “have fellowship [*koinōnia*] with us”; like Paul, he states that “our fellowship [*koinōnia*] is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 Jn 1:3).
 - ii. Paul wrote later in this letter, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation [*koinōnia*] in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation [*koinōnia*] in the body of Christ?”
 - iii. Paul also uses *κοινωνία* for the collection on behalf of the church in Jerusalem (Rom 15:26).
 - iv. The Greek verb *κοινωνέω* (*koinoneō*) expresses the act of giving and receiving a portion; the experience of having fellowship with someone in something.
 - v. Peter wrote, “But rejoice insofar as you share [*κοινωνέω*, *koinoneō*] Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Pet 4:13).
 - b. The Greek *κοινωνοί* are persons who stand in a relationship of community because they have a common share in something.
 - i. Paul considered Titus and Philemon his *κοινωνός* (*koinōnos*, “partner”, 2 Cor 8:23; Phlm 17).
 - ii. James and John were *κοινωνοί* with Simon (Lk 5:10).

¹⁵ Paul's introduction in 1 Corinthians consists of a salutation (1:1-3) and thanksgiving (1:4-9).

¹⁶ *Koinōnia* is translated as “partnership” in the NLT.

¹⁷ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 552.

- iii. Paul later wrote to the Corinthians, “Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share [*koinōnos*] in our sufferings, you will also share [*koinōnos*] in our comfort” (2 Cor 1:7).
- c. It is their *koinōnia* with Jesus that sets them apart (“sanctified”) or differentiates them in Corinth as “the church [*ekklesia* or people] of God” (vs 2).
 - i. In the salutation, Paul says that God’s people in Corinth were “called to be saints [*hagios*] together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”
 - ii. The Greek *hagios* refers to those who have been set apart or differentiated.
 - iii. They have been called to be God’s different people (“saints”) in Corinth.

Conclusion: Like many of the churches Paul founded in the Roman Empire, God’s church in Corinth was diverse and complex. It was predominantly made up of non-Jews, the majority of whom were at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder. There were, however, a handful of families who were wealthy enough to host Christian gatherings in their homes. By the time Paul wrote this letter, the disciples of Jesus in Corinth were experiencing serious divisions that were reflective of societal social divisions.

As former idol-worshipping pagans, they brought to their new way of life a Hellenistic worldview and some distorted views of ethical behavior. Although they believed in Jesus, their lives need to be rearranged once more. Their resocialization was incomplete. Their conversion was to be ongoing. Much of Corinthian culture was still in them. This revealed itself in attitudes and behaviors that needed to be corrected. In 1 Corinthians, Paul is continuing the process of nurturing new believers immersed in a Roman pagan city influenced by idolatry, sexual immorality and human wisdom. Paul’s goal is to help them see the real-life consequences of embracing Jesus’ gospel.