

Introduction

Corinth is a city located in the southern region of modern day Greece. The modern city is called Korinthos and is located about 65 miles almost straight west of Athens. In Bible times, Athens and Corinth were located in the region of Achaia, while the region just to the north was called Macedonia. Corinth is located on a four mile strip of land that forms an isthmus between the gulf of Corinth and the Saronic Gulf.

Being on the coast brought much trade from many regions to Corinth. This made the city rich with many luxuries and distractions from living a godly life. The sailors who came to Corinth also brought much wickedness to the area. Sexual sin was prevalent and normalized with the temple of Aphrodite in their midst with its hundreds of temple prostitutes. Corinth was so well known for its sexual perversion that “Corinthian girl” was the term commonly used for prostitute.

The church

The church of Corinth had its roots in Paul’s second apostolic journey. Before arriving in Corinth, He and Silas had visited Philippi, where they were beaten, imprisoned, and then released and strongly encouraged to leave the city (Acts 16). They proceeded to Thessalonica where Paul was given opportunity to preach in the synagogue. Within a month they were forced to leave by the unbelieving Jews who were threatening their lives (Acts 17).

Paul then went to Berea where he was once again forced to flee for his life. He continued southward, leaving Silas and Timothy in Berea. Paul stopped in Athens where he was able to minister for a while before heading to Corinth (Acts 18). It was in Corinth where he met Aquila and Pricilla, who were tentmakers like Paul. They, and all other Jews, were forced to leave Rome because of a decree by the emperor. They decided to go to Corinth and set up their tent making business, perhaps because Corinth was a good place to set up a business. Their business was bringing in enough money for them to support Paul in the ministry so that he would not need to spend his time making tents to support himself. He was able to speak in the synagogue every Sabbath and persuade both Jews and Greeks. He ministered in Corinth for 18 months helping the new believers grow in the knowledge of God’s grace.

Why did Paul write to the Corinthians?

Both first and second Corinthians were written while Paul was on his third apostolic journey, perhaps 4–5 years after establishing the church in Corinth. After spending 18 months at Corinth, Paul, along with Aquila and Pricilla, left Corinth and headed for Ephesus while on his way back to his home church at Antioch (Acts 18:18–21). While in Ephesus Paul wrote to the Corinthians. He actually wrote a letter to them before he wrote what we call 1 Corinthians. This previous letter encouraged them not to associate with immoral people who were presenting themselves as Christian brothers (1 Corinthians 5:9). While ministering in Ephesus with Aquila and Pricilla, he wrote 1 Corinthians (1 Corinthians 16:8). He had to write to them because he received word through the house of Chloe that there were contentions and quarrels going on within the church. Some were saying they were of Paul while others were claiming they were following Apollos, Peter, or the earthly Christ. Paul admonished them for distorting the doctrine he had taught them and in doing so, making void the cross of Christ. Instead of following the doctrine Paul had taught them, they were blindly following certain church leaders. This happens often today within Christian circles. People follow certain teachers without studying Scripture for themselves.

He begins his letter by admonishing them for their bad behavior and worldly practices, then answers a number of questions they had about marriage, divorce, Christian liberty, spiritual gifts and other doctrinal issues. They are baby Christians who needed the milk of the word (1 Corinthians 3:1–3).

Book order

The books Paul has written follow a specific order. Romans focuses on doctrine, 1 and 2 Corinthians focus on reproof, and Galatians focuses on correction. The following three books, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, maintain that same theme order. Doctrine gives biblical knowledge of what God wants us to know. Reproof is all about correcting bad behavior. Correction is about correcting wrong ideas about doctrine.

1 and 2 Corinthians are both written to set the Corinthians on the right moral path. They grew up in a pagan society with loose morals and now they had to learn what godly behavior entailed. They had to tear down everything they had learned in order to be built up in the way of the Lord. As they were learning how to live godly lives, they had a number of setbacks. Today, we would probably call them backsliders. They needed to grow up in the doctrine that Paul had taught them.

Paul, an apostle (verse 1)

Paul continually asserts his authority as an apostle who was committed with the Gospel of Grace but Jesus Christ. He is shown in 1 Corinthians 9 and again in 2 Corinthians 11 defending and asserting his apostleship to the Corinthians. There were many in the church at Corinth who began following other teachers and were moving away from the doctrine Paul had been teaching. God gave Paul his apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles (Romans 1:5). Even at the end of his life, he found it necessary to defend his position as an apostle (2 Timothy 1:11). The word *apostle* literally means sent ones. The 12 Disciples were sent by Jesus (Luke 6:13), Paul was sent by Jesus Christ (Acts 9:15), even Jesus Christ is an apostle of God the Father because He was sent by the Father (Hebrews 3:1). Other people who were helping Paul in his ministry (Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, etc.) were also sent by Christ (1 Thessalonians 2:6). Apostles were also given the ability, through the Holy Spirit, to do miracles, which are called the signs of an apostle (Acts 2:43; 2 Corinthians 12:12). Another qualification of Apostleship was that they were appointed by God (1 Corinthians 12:27–30; Ephesians 4:11). The Apostles formed the foundation of the church they were building. For the Kingdom church, the foundation was laid by Peter (Matthew 16:18–19). For the Body of Christ, Paul was the foundation (1 Corinthians 3:10–11). Paul was careful not to build upon Peter's foundation (Romans 15:20). There are no apostles today because it is not necessary that another foundation be laid to form another church (Ephesians 2:19–22).

Saints (verse 2)

The Corinthians were a bunch of carnal Christians. They were a product of their worldly environment and struggled to understand what it meant to be godly. In spite of their carnal behavior, Paul still calls them saints (1 Corinthians 1:2). It's obvious that those who were saved were going to remain saved because they were washed, sanctified, and justified (1 Corinthians 6:11). They may not have been living a godly life, but they were still eternally secure.

Some versions say that Paul was writing to believers who were "called to be" saints. The phrase *to be* is not in the original Greek and really muddles what Paul is saying. A literal translation of the Greek would say that Paul was writing to the sanctified, the ones called saints. Those who defend that they were called *to be* saints say that it is related to verse one where Paul was called to be an apostle. They say he was called to the office of apostle, like the believers were called to the office of saint.

The first problem with this is that saint is not an office, it is a position we occupy because we have been justified. Second, the Greek does not say that Paul was called *to be* and apostle, merely that he is called an apostle. Again, the phrase *to be* is not in the original Greek, but was added by the translators. I believe the meaning is much clearer when the phrase *to be* is eliminated. Paul was an apostle just like the believers were saints.

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