

PAUL'S FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS

INTRODUCTION

The Greek city of Corinth had a reputation as an important city, full of vice. It was a major center for trade, shipping, and commerce. Corinth, located on an isthmus, which was four to five miles wide, was a gateway for a short trip across Greece to markets. The seas around the south of Greece were treacherous to shipping. This made Corinth a prosperous mercantile community.

The Romans destroyed the city in their conquest in 146 BC. Julius Caesar had the city rebuilt after he named it a seat of government in 46 BC.

Corinth had at its roots the Greek influence as well as the Roman influence as Caesar developed the city by sending discharged soldiers to settle there.

During excavation, the remains of a Jewish synagogue was found. Luke spoke of it in Acts:

Ac18:1-4 After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, ³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade.

⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. (ESV)

As a major trade center, many people from different lands, races, value system, and religion settled there. The city was culturally diverse and cosmopolitan in every way.

Craig Keener writes: "Although a wide disparity between rich and poor characterized the Roman empire more generally, this problem was particularly acute in Corinth. Its mercantile character contributed to the presence of foreign religions and may have accelerated the level of sexual promiscuity, although some promiscuity was characteristic of ancient Greek urban male culture in general. Corinth was known for its prosperity, and the proverbial sexual looseness of ancient Greek Corinth seems to have continued in Roman Corinth as well.¹

Dwight Hunt writes: "materialism and immorality were prevalent. Much of the vice centered on the Temple of Aphrodite and its thousand temple prostitutes. Therefore the name Corinth was associated with blatant decadence, especially in connection with the worship of Aphrodite."²

¹ Craig S. Keener, [*The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*](#), Second Edition. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014), 459.

² Dwight L. Hunt, "[The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians](#)," in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 709.

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Like today, where English is the business language of the world, Latin was used for business in Corinth. However, most people spoke Greek, including Jewish immigrants from the surrounding area.

Roman settlers who became the founding citizens of New Corinth in 44 b.c.) Clearly the Corinthian church to whom Paul wrote his letters in Greek, understood him. Later in the first century, Clement of Rome also wrote to this church in Greek, which became Corinth's official language again in the early second century.³

It is generally accepted that this was the fourth of his epistles.

AUTHOR

Almost all scholars agree that the Apostle Paul is the writer of the first letter to the Corinthians. Paul arrived in Corinth during his second missionary journey.⁴ Historically, the early church fathers and second-century manuscripts confirm Paul as the writer. The early church fathers (Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, Eusebius) universally agreed, and it has never been seriously questioned, that Paul authored this book.

The Apostle Paul founded the church in Corinth (Acts 18:1–17) during his second missionary journey (50–51 AD). Paul says that He came to this city “in weakness, in fear, and much trembling:”

1Co 2:1-5 When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not be based on human wisdom but on God's power.

Paul was at Corinth for two years where he found great success, converting many souls who formed the church. It is here that he is introduced to Aquila and Priscilla, exiles from the purging of Jews from Rome by Claudius in 49 AD. Aquila and Priscilla were tentmakers by trade as was Paul.

The congregation included both Jews and Gentiles. When Paul left to continue planting churches, the church was solid and in good order. Peace and harmony were ever present, however, that soon changed after his departure.

DATE

Unlike other books in the NT, First Corinthians is much easier to define a date. Luke, in Acts, refers to two important events in the Roman world. These dates include the expulsion of Jews

³ Craig S. Keener, [*The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*](#), Second Edition. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014), 459.

⁴ Paul's second missionary journey takes place between 49-52 AD. According to Acts 15:36-18:22, Paul visits Antioch, Tarsus, Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Antioch in Pisidia, Troas, Samothracis, Neapolis, Philippi, Amphipolis, Apollonia, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, and Caesarea.

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from Rome in 49 AD and the appointment of Gallio as the province of Achaia's governor in 51 AD (Ac 18:12) while Paul was in Corinth.

Therefore, we can date Paul's arrival in Corinth in AD 50, he left Corinth about the middle of 52 AD (Ac 18:11). Paul traveled to Ephesus, remaining there for approximately three years. It was at the end of his ministry there, that he wrote this first epistle to the church in Corinth. Therefore, a date of around 54-57 AD is what we will use as the date.

Note: Paul refers to another letter that we do not have in our canon of Scripture (1Co 5:9)

PURPOSE AND CONTENT

It is very easy to understand that the congregation in Corinth was in chaos and confusion. Paul spends time in this epistle to teach the church in many different areas. It is easy to see the worldly influence on this fledgling church after Paul's departure, throughout the letter. In some cases, Paul must re-educate them on topics he covered earlier:

- Divisions within the church (1–4)
- A flagrant case of sexual immorality in the church (5)
- Lawsuits among believers (6)
- Sexual immorality (6)
- Marriage, divorce, and being single (7)
- Food offered to idols (8–10)
- Appropriate dress for women (11)
- Abuse of the Lord's Supper (11)
- Abuse of spiritual gifts and their practice (12–14)
- False teaching concerning the resurrection (15)

Scholars concur that Paul had visited Corinth while he was in Ephesus, even though that visit is not recorded in the canon, it is implied in:

2 Co 12:14 Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.

And

2 Co 13:1-2 This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

² I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them—

AUDIENCE

The audience is the church in Corinth. Through Paul's writing, we get a glimpse into what the early church life was like.

OUTLINE

- I. Opening Remarks (1:1–9)
- II. The Problem of Divisions (1:10–4:21)
- III. Moral Dysfunctions in the Church (5:1–6:20)
- IV. Paul Answers Various Questions (7:1–14:40)
- V. The Resurrection and Its Implications (15:1–58)
- VI. The Jerusalem Offering (16:1–9)
- VII. Concluding Remarks (16:10–24)⁵

KEY THOUGHT/CENTRAL MESSAGE

The key thought and central message is one of correction. The news that Paul received from the many issues within the church forced this epistle. (See “Purpose and Content” section)

OLD TESTAMENT CONNECTIONS

1 Corinthians has twenty-six references to the Old Testament. (for example, 1Co 2:9-13; 6:9-11; 9:24-10:11)

KEY VERSES

(1 Cor 1:18-19; 2:2, 9, 14; 3:15-17; 5:5; 6:19-20; 7:20; 8:9; 9:22, 24-25; 10:23-24; 10:31; 11:29-30; 13:4-7; 15:14)

KEY WORDS

- Wisdom – 18 times
- Weak – 10 times
- Body – 43 times
- Knowledge – 11 times
- Spiritual – 15 times
- Gifts – 9 times
- Judge – 13 times

⁵ Dwight L. Hunt, “[The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.](#)” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 711.