

Study 1: Introduction to 1st Corinthians

Introduction

Background to the City of Corinth

Background to the church at Corinth

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Brief outline of the letter

Homework and preparation for next week:

- Read chapter 1, 2 and 3 in a single sitting.
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Work through the introduction and conclusion, and identify the key themes.

Notes for Study 1: Introduction to 1st Corinthians

Introduction

To study a letter that was written to a specific church, we need to understand the local culture into which it was written. This is especially so in the case of the Corinthian letters. The letters are full of “*doctrine*”, and it is as if the lid were taken off the congregation so that we can look at what is happening inside.

But the inside is not a pretty picture. The church in a community does not exist in a vacuum. A community has its own particular characteristics and culture. The church has the responsibility to take the gospel to the world. But in Corinth, the world has invaded the church.

This is a great example for our own situation, where the culture of the western world has rapidly moved from one where immorality was at the very least, frowned upon, to one in which it is widely practiced and considered the norm, and a valid lifestyle.

Just how did Paul deal with such situations? How did he approach the issues? Apart from learning what he *taught* on the matters at hand, there are some great lessons to be learned on how to deal with them as we put the Corinthian church under the magnifying glass.

Background to the City of Corinth

Corinth was (and is) strategically placed at the top of the peninsular that forms the lower part of Greece (the Peloponnese). On the East is the Aegean Sea, and on the West is the Adriatic sea. Corinth had two sea ports – Cenchrea to the East, and Lechaion to the West. At the narrowest point, the isthmus was about 5 km wide. This gave a strategic position to Corinth, as much trade would pass through the city as a “short-cut” between the two seas, rather than to make the difficult sea journey around the lower part of Greece.

Further, any army travelling North or South would have to pass through Corinth, which gave strategic military advantage to those who control Corinth. Attempts to build a canal between the two seas were commenced by Nero around the time of Paul’s visit, however it was abandoned after a very short distance. The canal was in fact completed in 1893. In Paul’s time, a railway with wooden rails was used to transport fully laden small ships (boats) from one sea to the other. Slaves would haul the ships for this journey, and whilst they were undertaking the task the sailors would have shore leave in Corinth. This greatly contributed to the vice and immorality in the city.

The ancient city of Corinth had a reputation for corruption and immorality so that the phrase “*to live like a Corinthian*” meant to live a life of drunken and immoral debauchery. The city was prosperous because of the trade, and the rewards of that prosperity were spent on immorality. The new city of Corinth – the Corinth of Paul’s time – had rapidly developed the same reputation as the ancient city.

In 146 BC the (ancient) city had revolted against the Romans, and they retaliated by levelling it. Julius Caesar recognised the strategic importance of the city, and rebuilt it around 44 BC as a Roman Colony. So, by the time of Paul’s visits (and the Corinthian letters), the city is about 100 years old, and with a population around 400,000 people.

Corinth was the home of the Isthmian Games, (the Corinthian games) which were held every two years and ranked just below those of Olympia in importance. Paul makes reference to such in 1:9:24-27.

Religion in the city was not a strange thing, and at the summit of the imposing mountain behind Corinth – Acrocorinth – was a temple of the Greek god Aphrodite – the goddess of love. The temple supported 1000 religious prostitutes. At the foot of the hill was the temple of Melicertes – the patron of seafarers, and the sea-god Poseidon was especially honoured at the Isthmus Games.

It can be said that the character of the city is expressed and reflected in the problems that later grew in the church, and the church at Corinth has been described as follows:

Imagine a church wracked by divisions. Powerful leaders promote themselves against each other, each with his band of followers. One of them is having an affair with his stepmother, and, instead of disciplining him, many in the church boast of his freedom in Christ to behave in such a way. Believers sue each other in secular courts; some like to visit prostitutes. As a backlash against this rampant immorality, another faction in this church is promoting celibacy – complete sexual abstinence for all believers – as the Christian ideal. Still other debates rage about how decisively new Christians should break from their pagan past. Disagreements about men’s and women’s roles in the church add to the confusion. As if all this were not enough, alleged prophecies and speaking in tongues occur regularly, but not always in constructive fashion. A significant number of these immature Christians do not even believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ!¹

With such a background, it would at first glance be a highly unlikely source of fertile ground for the gospel. Yet God assures Paul “...*I have much people in this city...*” (18:10).

Paul came to Corinth after a disappointing time in Athens. Corinth was the leading city in Greece at that time, and greatly overshadowed Athens. With such a reputation, it is not surprising that Paul says “...*I came to you...in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling...*” (1:2:1-3 NKJV).

Background to the church at Corinth

Paul’s visit to the Corinth is recorded in Acts 18. He first came across Aquilla and Priscilla who were Jews. We do not know when they became christians, but it would be surprising that if they were already christians (come from Rome) that Luke would not have noted them as *brethren*, rather than how he describes them as *a certain Jew*. Paul joined in business with them and worked at his trade of tentmaking.

Paul begins teaching in the synagogue and is soon (after about 3 months) joined by Silas and Timothy who had come from Macedonia (Thessalonica and Berea). The Jews rejected Paul, and he goes to the house of Justus, who lived next door to the synagogue. The Ruler of the Synagogue – Crispus – is converted along with “...*many of the Corinthians...*” (Acts 18:8).

The Lord appears to Paul to reassure him, and Paul stays and works with the church for 18 months. The timing of Paul’s visit was AD 52 – AD 53 (see my notes on Acts, chapter 18 for a more detailed discussion on the date of Paul’s visit).

Paul moves on, and goes by way of Ephesus back to Antioch. He was impressed by the positive response at Ephesus and returns to spend over 2 years there (in Ephesus) from AD 54 through early AD 57 (more on this latter date a bit later).

Ephesus was the 4th largest city in the world at that time, and with Corinth also a major city on the trading route between Rome and Byzantium (Constantinople / Istanbul), it was not surprising that Paul was kept informed of the things that were happening in Corinth.

After hearing about the problems and the things that were happening in Corinth, Paul wrote a stern letter of condemnation to them. The letter, now lost is referred to in 1:5:9, and it is generally believed that he made a short visit to Corinth whilst in Ephesus that is not recorded in Acts.

The church at Corinth had written to Paul to ask him about several matters, and Paul responds with the answer to their questions in the letter known as first epistle.

¹ Blomberg, Craig: The NIV Application Commentary – Quoted from Jenkins, F: Christ and Culture at Corinth, Florida College Lectures 1996.

A short time later, Paul makes another trip to Corinth in late AD 57 and stayed 3 months (Acts 20:2-3). On the journey back to Jerusalem, Paul writes the second letter to the Corinthians from Thessalonica or Philippi.

Date and Occasion of the letter

Date

The letter was undoubtedly written from Ephesus – Paul says that he plans to “...wait in Ephesus until Pentecost...” (1:16:8-9) due to the *great and effectual door that had been opened* to him. The question is when during this time? Paul says that he worked in Ephesus “...for the space of three years...” (Acts 20:31). This does not mean for “36 months” but rather over the space of three calendar years. In fact, Paul worked with the church for around 2 years and three months (refer to my notes on Ephesians and on Acts chapter 19 for further discussion on this).

So, if Paul stayed until Pentecost and then left, and he had arrived quite late in the year AD 54, then he was in Ephesus for three Pentecosts – AD 55, AD 56 and AD 57.

Paul’s plans – including his travel plans are quite firm:

- 1:16:1-2 He gives quite specific instruction concerning the collection
- He was intending to come soon to deal with the matter
- 1:16:5 Quite definite plans to go through Macedonia
- 1:16:10 Specific instructions regarding Timothy
- 1:16:12 Specific comments regarding Apollos

This puts the date of the letter as quite late in the time at Ephesus, in the early part of AD 57 during Paul’s third missionary journey.

Occasion

The culture at Corinth had permeated the church. Paul had kept abreast of what was happening in Corinth due to the frequency of trade between Corinth and Ephesus. Brethren undoubtedly would have travelled and reported to Paul what was happening. Paul in fact is quite specific “...*Chloe’s household have reported to me that ...*” (1:1:11). Paul has already written them the “lost letter” which was apparently condemning of their practices (1:5:9), and had possibly made a quick trip (not reported by Luke) to Corinth during his stay at Ephesus.

The Corinthians had written to Paul (probably in response to the lost letter), and asked him some questions. Paul methodically addresses these in the letter:

- Sex and marriage (1:7:1)
- Virgins (1:7:25)
- Food sacrificed to idols (1:8:1)
- Spiritual gifts (1:12:1)
- The collection for the saints (1:16:1)

The occasion of the letter is therefore Paul’s response to the questions that the brethren had asked him. It was most likely sent via Timothy in preparation for Paul’s visit with them (1:16:10-11).

Paul’s association with the church

After a disappointing visit in Athens, Paul came to Corinth. The city had “*a reputation*” and must have seemed like the most unlikely place for the gospel to prosper. Paul came with *fear and trepidation*. Right from the beginnings of the church in Corinth, Paul had been there. He describes *the household of Stephanas* as the *firstfruits of Achaia* (1:16:15) so they must have been some of the first converts. However the same greeting is given to Epaenetus (Rom 16:5) so he may well have been part of Stephanas’ house – perhaps a servant.

When Paul came, there apparently was no church meeting there, since Paul “*hooked up*” with Aquila and Priscilla because they were two Jews who shared the same trade as Paul. In his usual style, Paul begins in the synagogue, and has some moderate success at reasoning with some of the Jews and Greeks (Acts 18:4). However as a single christian in the city, he is constrained in his approach. About 3 months later Timothy and Silas come to join him, and Paul is now moved to open up “...and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ...” (Acts 18:5 NKJV).

The reaction is largely one of rejection – although not total rejection. So, Paul moves next door and the church commences with a couple of people who had been converted (presumably) Justus, and Crispus (the Ruler of the Synagogue). Luke reports that “...many of the Corinthians...” were converted (Acts 18:8).

After staying for 18 months, and having some degree of persecution, Paul leaves and heads to Ephesus (Acts 18:11, 18-19) taking Priscilla and Aquila with him.

In the earliest parts of the letter, Paul makes mention of those whom he baptised, and those whom he didn't. Several things are clear from this. Firstly, that Paul had a very strong knowledge and relationship with the brethren. He knew them, even though he had not personally baptised them. It is a period of around 3 ½ to 4 years since Paul left, and things in the church are falling apart. Had Paul – or one of the other missionaries – stayed in the church for the duration, then things would never have digressed to where they had. It is obvious that Paul had kept a *watching brief* on what was happening in Corinth. His arrival back in Ephesus was only around 6 or 9 months after he had left Corinth, and during the entire time of his stay there he would have had the communication line opened that allowed him to be fully aware of the things that were happening as the world invaded the church.

A fundamental question is: *What happened after Paul left Corinth?* Paul certainly would not have put up with the nonsense whilst he was there – and he wouldn't have *walked away* and left them in a mess to sort out. Those who had the spiritual gifts and were the elders and leaders in the congregation had responsibilities in teaching and leadership. Paul had only been gone for a bit over 4 years when he wrote the letter – and he had already written a previous one. So, what happened after Paul left Corinth?

Brief outline of the letter

Paul deals in turn with a great many (11) different issues, which makes a concise summary of the letter difficult.

1:1:1-9	Introduction
1:1:10-1:4:21	Division and leadership issues
1:5:1-13	An issue of incest
1:6:1- 11	External litigation of an internal dispute
1:6:12-20	Going to prostitutes
1:7:1-24	Sex and marriage
1:7:25-40	Those never married
1:8:1 – 1:11:1	Eating food offered to idols
1:11:2-16	Head covering in worship
1:11:17-34	The Lord's supper
1:12:1- 1:14:40	Spiritual gifts
1:15:1-58	The resurrection
1:16:1-11	The collection
1:16:12-24	Conclusion and travel plans

As an exercise, circle or highlight the key thoughts from the introduction, and also those from the conclusion, and then link them together. Make a list – with special attention to those that appear in both places. (*Quoted from NIV*)

^{1CO 1:1} Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

^{1CO 1:2} To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours:

^{1CO 1:3} Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

^{1CO 1:4} I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵ For in him you have been enriched in every way--in all your speaking and in all your knowledge-- ⁶ because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. ⁷ Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸ He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

^{1CO 1:10} I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another

^{1CO 16:12} Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity.

^{1CO 16:13} Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. ¹⁴ Do everything in love.

^{1CO 16:15} You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. I urge you, brothers, ¹⁶ to submit to such as these and to everyone who joins in the work, and labors at it. ¹⁷ I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you. ¹⁸ For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. Such men deserve recognition.

^{1CO 16:19} The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house. ²⁰ All the brothers here send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

^{1CO 16:21} I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand.

^{1CO 16:22} If anyone does not love the Lord--a curse be on him. Come, O Lord!

^{1CO 16:23} The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.

^{1CO 16:24} My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen.