



The city of Corinth was located about 70 kilometers south-southwest of Athens at the base of Acrocorinth, a 575 meter high mountain which served as a lookout for the city. In the days of the Apostle Paul it served as the capital for the senatorial province of Achaia. The city had previously been destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. and rebuilding had been forbidden. The residents of old Corinth were made slaves or executed.



After a hundred years, the city was rebuilt in 46 B.C. by Julius Caesar. The newest inhabitants were largely freed slaves who looked at Corinth as a new opportunity, veterans from military service in Rome, indigenous Greeks, and immigrants from across the empire many of whom were tradesmen and labourers. The old city of Corinth was Greek, the new city was decidedly Roman even though it was still geographically Greek. The official language of Corinth in the first century A.D. was Latin and Roman law prevailed.



The city sat on the southern side of the narrow isthmus which connected the mainland of Greece to the Peloponnese. The isthmus is only 8 km wide at its narrowest point.

Corinth had two harbours. To the east about 14 km away was the Saronic Gulf and the town of Cenchrea. To the northwest only 2.5 km away was Lechaemum on the Corinthian gulf. The isthmus was so narrow that often cargo was carried from one side to the other and if

the ship was small enough, the entire ship was pulled the 7 kilometers to the other side. This saved the long trip sailing around the Peloponnese and sailing around the southern coast of the Peloponnesian peninsula was long and dangerous. Because of this strategic location, Corinth was a vital link in transportation of goods and it reaped economic benefits.

In the first century Corinth had a population of about 80,000 and was a commercial and religious center and was known for its bronze artisans and well as for pottery which were exported widely. The agora or marketplace in Corinth was one of the largest anywhere and the city itself was the largest and most prosperous in Greece.

The city was made up a few very rich people with the vast majority being very poor (1 Cor. 1:26). The agriculture around Corinth was poor, but overall the city was an economic powerhouse.

Because of the strategic location for commerce travelers brought a considerable amount of wealth as well as a great number of religions. Archaeologists have uncovered evidence of more than two dozen temples, altars, and shrines. Greek philosophies and mystery cults from Egypt and Asia were prominent within the city.

Corinth held colony status within the Roman Empire. This made Roman laws supreme and Latin the official language even though most of the population spoke Greek. In some ways, Corinth was even more important than Athens as the lead city of Achaia. It is said to have been the most Hellenistic of all the cities of the New Testament.

One of the most famous sporting events of the ancient world was the Isthmian games which were second in importance to the Olympics. These games were held every two years and contributed to the prestige and economy of the city. This is the background of Paul's writing in 1 Cor. 9:24-27 where Paul uses athletic illustrations and emphasizes the imperishable crown that Christians will receive. The crown given to the winners in the Isthmian games were made from withered celery plants.

Ben Witherington writes about the honor-shame cultural orientation of the Corinthians. The Corinthians craved public recognition and an honorable reputation. In Corinth, boasting had become an art form. This brings about problems in the church with boasting and false pride.¹

There were many who were wealthy and they paraded their wealth for everyone to see. Social status was vitally important, so people would do everything they possibly could to get ahead and to get recognition. Their basic lifestyle surrounded trade, business, and looking for success. Corinthians looked to gain wealth because their wealth could help them to acquire social standing.

Stephen M. Pogoloff says that the Corinthians looked not for truth, "but for applause and success ..."² People were more concerned with being successful than being ethical. According to Thiselton, "The pragmatic criterion of becoming a winner in the marketplace, sometimes with a sacrifice of personal integrity, made its impact on Corinthian rhetoric."³

It is amazing to see how much Corinth in the 1st century resembles the western world in the 21st century. Both are concerned with status, immigration and trade, and are highly individualistic. Style wins over substance and feeling over truth. Both cultures are pluralistic and the church is compromised when it falls into step with the society around it.

Religion in Corinth

The primary religion was the worship of Aphrodite or Venus, the goddess of love, beauty, and fertility. Some say that the temple of Aphrodite held 1,000 prostitutes and worship involved having a sexual relationship with a prostitute. Prostitutes considered Aphrodite their patroness. Roman historians claimed that "Not every man which visit Corinth" because one had to be of high character to overcome the temptations to sin in that city. Others say that the number of prostitutes is

¹ Witherington III, Ben. *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.

² Pogoloff, Stephen M. *Logos and Sophia: The Rhetorical Situation of 1 Corinthians*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992.

³ Thiselton, Athony C. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: NIGTC*.

highly exaggerated though certainly sexual immorality was rampant. Other prominent religions in the city were Poseidon the god of the sea; Isis, god of religion, Aesclepius, the god of healing, and the emperor of Rome was also worshipped.

The 1,000 temple prostitutes seem to have been a part of old Corinth that was destroyed in 146 B.C. The new Corinth of the 1st century had only a small temple of Aphrodite. Still, we know that sexual immorality was a rampant problem in the city from the writings of Paul. Though the temple worship of Aphrodite may have not been prominent, there was a flourishing trade in prostitution as was true of nearly every ancient port city.

Also in Corinth was the temple of Apollo the god of prophecy, a temple of Asklepios, the god of physical, emotional, and mental health, a temple for Hera Argaea, the goddess of marriage, and a temple for Tyche, the god of fate or luck.⁴ Mercury, Jupiter, Poseidon/Neptune, Zeus, and Isis were worshipped and the imperial cult was found in Corinth.

Along with the religion of the travelers, Corinth was filled with every sin imaginable. Sailors who passed through Corinth helped to give Corinth the name “Sin City.” In fact the term *korinthiazeshai* was coined to refer to sexual immorality in old Corinth. Literally the word *korinthiazeshai* means to act like a Corinthian. New Corinth was also a sinful city, but probably no more so than other seaport cities. The church in Corinth struggled to live faithfully in such a sin-saturated society. (This seems true today around the world as the church fights the same temptations that are found in the world around them.)

Drunkenness was a major problem in the city and Corinthians were ridiculed in the plays of the day as being drunkards. Venereal diseases plagued the city. The sins caused the city to be known as the most sinful city in the world.

The Authorship of 1 Corinthians

Paul is virtually unattested as the author of 1 Corinthians. Not only does he name himself as author in 1:1 and 16:21, he has been recognised throughout history as the author of 1 Corinthians. This letter was probably written between A.D. 53 and 57 and the most likely time was the spring of A.D. 54 or 55.⁵

The Church in Corinth

The church in Corinth probably was established around the year A.D. 50 by the Apostle Paul shortly after he began the churches in Philippi and Thessalonica at the end of his Second Missionary Journey. He arrived in Corinth from Athens. When Paul arrives he meets Aquila and Priscilla who had come to Corinth from Rome when Claudius forced Jews to leave the city. He was soon joined by Silas and Timothy.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Terry, Bruce. *A Discourse Analysis of First Corinthians: Literary Concerns*. http://bible.ovu.edu/terry/dissertation/2_2-lit.htm

We can reliably date the start of the church in Corinth because Gallio was appointed proconsul in the summer of A.D. 51 and Paul appeared before him probably later that year (Acts 18:12). In Acts 18:11, Luke records that Paul had been in Corinth for one year and six months when Gallio brought Paul before the tribunal.

Why would Paul spend so much time in Corinth when he clearly spent less time in other churches he started? 1) The church was especially troubled and vulnerable to the world around them; 2) Corinth was a major hub for travel and commerce. If he could reach people in Corinth, they could carry the Gospel around the world; 3) Corinth was a good place for Paul to practice his trade of “tent-making.” 4) The city had a high rate of immigration and when people move, they are often more open to accepting new ideas. 5) Large Jewish population.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians from the city of Ephesus where he stayed from A.D. 53-56. (1 Corinthians was probably penned in 54 or 55 A.D.) He had heard bad news about the immorality within the church. The apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians that we do have any longer. It was written prior to 1 Corinthians according to 1 Cor. 5:9-12. This lost letter is often referred to as the “previous letter.” In this previous letter Paul had instructed the Corinthians not to associate with sexually immoral people in the church.

The letter we know as 1 Corinthians comes as a response to reports from Chloe’s household about infighting in the church (1:11) and well as other problems. In 1 Cor. 7:1, we see that the Corinthians had written to Paul posing questions about how to handle various problems.

The church is made up mostly of people of a poor economic background (1 Cor 1:26), though there were some who had some wealth. We note that Gaius is a host to Paul and the whole church (Romans 16:23), so he must have some financial means. Erastus (Romans 16:23 also mentions Erastus as being the city treasurer, so again we have a man with some financial means and a responsible government position.

It is likely that some of the problems faced in Corinth come from a disparity in incomes or the problems show that people of wealth were involved. In the instance of lawsuits, it has been suggested that only the wealthy could have afforded to bring lawsuits. Furthermore the problems concerning the Lord’s Supper in Corinth may have something to do with a difference of financial and social standing. Those who had to work could not make it early to the supper, while those who were wealthy went ahead and ate without waiting for the others. Apparently a number of the problems the church faced came from a tension between different social and economic classes. It is clear that the haves had no trouble humiliating the have not’s at the Lord’s Supper.

The values of Corinth as a whole were opposed to the message of the cross. Whereas the message of the cross is one of love, selflessness, and seeing every person with equal worth; the desire for social standing destroyed the fellowship and Christian witness of the church. (Note 1 Cor. 1:26-31).

When we look at the names in 1 Corinthians as well as other New Testament books that mention members of the church in Corinth we can say that it was mixed with Romans, Greeks, and Jews. Latin names included Fortunatus, Quartus, and Gaius; Greek names were Stephanas, Achaicus, and Erastus, and Jews were Aquila and Prisca. In 1 Cor. 12:13 Paul lists people within the church as being Jew, Greek, slave, and free (1 Cor. 7:20-24 teach us that some of the members of the church were slaves. The city may have been 60% slaves in the first century.)

The church had a multitude of problems that Paul addresses in 1 and 2 Corinthians. Some of these problems included sexual immorality, divorce, lawsuits among the members of the church, food sacrificed to idols, misuse of spiritual gifts in the church, and problems associated with the Lord's Supper. Some within the church were also questioning the authority of Paul.

Corinthian House Churches

The church met in various houses around the city since there would have been no place for the church to meet publicly. Church buildings did not come into popularity until the 3rd century. Murphy O'Connor says that from the 14 males listed in the church in 1 and 2 Corinthians there were probably about 50 members in the church. It is probable that the whole church came together infrequently (Rom 16:23, 1 Cor. 14:23,) but usually met in smaller groups in the homes of members. The size of the homes simply did not allow for large crowds in one place.⁶ So, we should envision a number of house churches that received Paul's correspondence instead of one large congregation.

Corinthian Christians would have met in the homes of more affluent members. From homes that have been excavated we know something of the structure of the homes. In the homes were located private rooms for sleeping, offices for the head of the house; a section probably for the women and children; apartments for slaves; rented rooms; on the street side a shop or two, perhaps a tavern or even a hotel, sometimes connecting with the atrium; and centrally located, a dining room.

Those who attended the church meeting entered the house through the door leading to the atrium. The atrium had a large opening in the roof that let in light and allowed rain to fall into a pool below. The pool) could have been used for washing hands before dinner and also for baptisms.

The church community gathered in a room where people could recline for a meal. The dining room itself would have been furnished with couches. After dinner, a more formal time of worship was held in the office or study. If the group was large, people stood in the atrium.⁷

A Proposed reconstruction of Paul's Relationship with the Church in Corinth

1. Paul visits Corinth and plants the church (Acts 18).
2. Paul departs Corinth and goes to Ephesus.
3. While in Ephesus Paul writes the "Previous Letter" mentioned in 1 Cor. 5:9. We don't know many details, but he wrote to them about problems associated with sexual immorality.
4. Paul receives a letter requesting answers to questions from the church. About the same time Paul is brought news by some of Chloe's people concerning problems in the church. (1 Cor 1:1; 11:18)
5. Paul pens 1 Corinthians to deal with the various issues that troubled the church.

⁶ Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002. p. 182ff.

⁷ Taken from <http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/corinthians/house.stm> on 24 July 2006.

6. (1:11; 11:18). Paul also writes in response to a letter brought to him by Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16:15,17). This letter seems came to Paul in response to his previous letter.
7. Paul's painful visit
8. Paul's "severe letter"
9. The writing of 2 Corinthians
10. Paul's anticipated visit.