

## The Church at Corinth



1 Corinthians 1:1 "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours."

Corinth was one of the largest and most important cities of Ancient Greece, one that had an estimated population of 90,000 in the year 400 BCE. Corinth was well known because of its strategic location on the isthmus, that narrow stretch of land that joins the Peloponnese peninsula to the mainland of Greece. Corinth was thus roughly halfway between Athens in the north and

Sparta in the south. And through that isthmus all land traffic had to pass *en route* to and from the Peloponnese, such that in classical times, Corinth rivaled Athens and Thebes in terms of wealth.

In 146 BCE, however, The Roman Republic declared war on the Greek city-state of Corinth and its allies in the Achaean (*uh-KEE-an*) League. A series of Roman victories culminated in the Battle of Corinth, after which the Roman army besieged, captured, and burned the city to the ground. This was the final stage of Rome's conquest of mainland Greece, and Corinth remained largely deserted until Julius Caesar refounded it in 44 BCE, over a hundred years later. Under the Romans, Corinth was then rebuilt as a major city in Southern Greece and had a large mixed population of Romans, Greeks, and Jews, which set the stage for a most interesting Christian enterprise.

St. Paul founded the Christian congregation there in Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18), establishing a church with help from Aquila and Priscilla, fellow tentmakers and Christians, as the three of them stayed and worked together there over 18 months. There Paul faced numerous challenges addressing the divisions, the immorality, and the doctrinal issues of their day, making it a pivotal, albeit troubled, early Christian community. After Paul left, he wrote a series of letters to the Church at Corinth to continue

to assist them in their troubles (letters which we know as 1st & 2nd Corinthians). But Paul is actually known to have written four letters to the Christian community at Corinth, with the two we have today representing the second and fourth of those four. Paul wrote all of those letters to address the specific problems of that congregation, offering correction, guidance, and encouragement, as he did with other congregations he founded.

These Corinthian letters are, however, some of Paul's most extensive writings, revealing the very human struggles and also the profound faith of this influential congregation. There is also a so-called Third Letter to the Corinthians found in the Armenian New Testament, but it is not thought by most scholars to have actually been written by Paul. Of course, the same is true of the Letters to Timothy and Titus in our New Testament.

Paul arrived in Corinth, you may remember, after fleeing from Athens, fleeing from the questioning he received at the Areopagus after preaching in the marketplace there. Paul joined with Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth, who had been expelled from Rome with all the other Jews under the Emperor's Claudius' edict in 49 CE (Acts 18.1-4). It is interesting to note that Roman historian Suetonius said that Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome on account of the turmoil that a figure named "Chrestus" was causing among the Jews. Most modern historians believe this to be a reference to Jesus as the Christ and

referring to the disruption among the Jews in Rome when the Gospel was first brought there. A similar disruption now occurred in Corinth.

Paul, you may remember, initially preached in the Jewish synagogue in Corinth as was his custom, but he faced fierce opposition there. When Gallio became proconsul of Acaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before his tribunal. They said, "This man is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to (our) law" (Acts 18:1-4) Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of crime or serious villainy, I would be justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews, but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I do not wish to be a judge of these matters." And he dismissed the crowd from the tribunal. Then the crowd, we are told in Acts, seized Sosthenes, the chief ruler of the synagogue in Corinth, and proceeded to beat him in front of the tribunal to get the attention of the proconsul. But Gallio still paid no mind to them (Acts 18:12-18).

Paul, not surprisingly, then moved his ministry out of the synagogue to a nearby house (owned by Titius Justus, we are told), attracting there Crispus (another synagogue leader from Corinth, who later became the Bishop of Chalcedon) and many Gentile converts, among them Gaius (to whom the Third Letter of

John is addressed, and who was later Bishop of Ephesus). In 52 CE, Paul moved to Ephesus with Aquila and Priscilla where he taught for three years (Acts 18:18-19:41). It was during this time that Paul sent Apollos to visit Corinth on his behalf. Paul also wrote his first letter to the Corinthians at this time, and perhaps sent it with Apollos, though sadly it is now lost to us. In the letter, Paul gave a strong warning against associating with immoral people, he later wrote (1 Corinthians 5:9-11). Paul soon received news from Chloe's people in Corinth about serious divisions in the church there (1 Corinthians 1:11), next week's reading, where some claimed to be followers of Paul, some to Apollos, and some to Cephas (that is, Peter) amidst actual physical violence in the congregation it would seem.

In 55 or 56 CE, while he was still in Ephesus, Paul began a flurry of activity that was centered on those problems in Corinth. He responded to these reports and questions by writing his second letter to Corinth (what we know as 1st Corinthians). Very soon after that letter, Paul made a second trip to the city which he later referred to as a "painful visit" (1 Corinthians 4:19; 2 Corinthians 2:1-2). A few months later he sent Titus to deliver his third letter to Corinth (which is also now sadly lost to history). This was a letter of "many tears," he later wrote, a letter in which he pleaded with the Corinthians to change their behavior (2 Corinthians 2:3-9; 7:6-15). Titus

reported back that the congregation had responded well to his visit, and while the Christian Corinthians were changing their behavior about some things, there were still disputes about Paul's authority as an apostle (2 Corinthians 2:13; 10:1-13:10).

Titus' report prompted Paul's fourth letter to Corinth, which was written approximately one year after his second (57 CE) and is what we know as 2nd Corinthians. Soon thereafter, Paul made a third visit to Corinth. He stayed for about three months, finalized a collection for the church in Jerusalem and appears to have repaired whatever relational damage remained between him and the congregation (Acts 20:2-3; 2 Corinthians 12:14; 13:1). Priscilla and Aquila returned to Rome, where it is thought by some in light of her apparent prominence, that Priscilla held the office of presbyter or priest there. She also is thought by some to be the anonymous author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Timothy remained with Paul and sometime between 57 and 61 CE Paul and his entourage delivered the collection he had been taking up at various churches throughout Asia Minor and presented what must have been a sizeable relief gift to the Jerusalem church, which was struggling with the aftereffects of a severe famine. Paul, as you may remember, was soon arrested there in the Temple in Jerusalem, which thus began his long journey to Rome as a prisoner in chains.

So, Paul's letters to the Corinthians give us historians some firsthand information about the early Church, about struggles with the Jews in the local synagogue and the eventual moving out of the synagogues as Christian congregations began to form house churches, a pattern that continued elsewhere. We see firsthand the welcoming of Gentiles and so-called 'God fearers' into Christian congregations, many of whom appear to have attended the local synagogue previously, which may help explain the occasional confrontation with Jewish leaders, sometimes taking away what may have been some of their wealthiest members. Thus we see here how the universality of Christianity was so attractive to non-Jews. Remember, in Paul's communities there was no distinction made between Jews and Gentiles, which caused some problems among Christians about the question of circumcision and eating kosher food at the weekly Christian gatherings on Sunday. Paul's communities also made no distinction between male and female, despite this practice conflicting with local Roman and Jewish customs of the day, and also between free men and slaves. Indeed, Christian slave-owners were encouraged by Paul to free their slaves and treat them as fellow brothers in the Christ, a radical departure that threatened the Roman social order. We also see firsthand the struggles of early Christian congregations with local pagan practices, where artisans, for example, complained that Paul's

teaching that idols made by hand were not real gods threatened their very livelihood! So not surprisingly, there were a lot of problems in the early church, wherever it was established, and we get some of our best first-hand witnesses about how those problems were handled in Paul's letters. So let me conclude by quoting here the most famous lines of Paul perhaps, which were addressed to the Church at Corinth, and not some wedding couple as we so often imagine.

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a

child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." Amen.