

## Introduction to 1 Corinthians

### NIV Study Bible

#### Corinth in the Time of Paul

The city of Corinth, perched like a one-eyed Titan astride the narrow isthmus connecting the Greek mainland with the Peloponnese, was one of the dominant commercial centers of the Mediterranean world as early as the eighth century b.c.

No city in Greece was more favorably situated for land and sea trade. With a high, strong citadel at its back, it lay between the Saronic Gulf and the Ionian Sea, with ports at Lechaion and Cenchrea. A *diolkos*, or stone road for the overland transport of ships, linked the two seas. Crowning the Acrocorinth was the temple of Aphrodite, served, according to Strabo, by more than 1,000 pagan priestess-prostitutes.

By the time the gospel reached Corinth in the spring of a.d. 52, the city had a proud history of leadership in the Achaian League, and a spirit of revived Hellenism under Roman domination after 44 b.c. following the destruction of the city by Mummius in 146 b.c.

Paul's lengthy stay in Corinth brought him directly in contact with the major monuments of the *agora*, many of which still survive. The fountain-house of the spring *Peirene*, the temple of Apollo, the *macellum* or meat market (1Co 10:25) and the theater, the *bema* (Ac 18:12), and the unimpressive synagogue all played a part in the experience of the apostle. An inscription from the theater names the city official Erastus, probably the friend of Paul mentioned in Ro 16:23 (see note there).

#### Author and Date

Paul is acknowledged as the author both by the letter itself (1:1–2; 16:21) and by the early church fathers. His authorship was attested by Clement of Rome as early as a.d. 96, and today practically all NT interpreters concur. The letter was written c. 55 (see chart, p. 2261) toward the close of Paul's three-year residency in Ephesus (see 16:5–9; Ac 20:31). It is clear from his reference to staying at Ephesus until Pentecost (16:8) that he intended to remain there somewhat less than a year when he wrote 1 Corinthians.

#### The City of Corinth

Corinth was a thriving city; it was at the time the chief city of Greece both commercially and politically. See map and diagram, p. 2355.

1. *Its commerce.* Located just off the Corinthian isthmus (see map, p. 2288), it was a crossroads for travelers and traders. It had two harbors: (1) Cenchrea, six miles to the east on the Saronic Gulf, and (2) Lechaion, a mile and a half to the north on the Corinthian Gulf. Goods were transported across the isthmus on the Diolkos, a stone road by which smaller ships could be hauled fully loaded across the isthmus, and by which cargoes of larger ships could be transported by wagons from one side to the other. Trade flowed through the city from Italy and Spain to the west and from Asia Minor, Phoenicia and Egypt to the east.

2. *Its culture.* Although Corinth was not a university town like Athens, it was characterized nevertheless by typical Greek culture. Its people were interested in Greek philosophy and placed a high premium on wisdom.
3. *Its religion.* Corinth contained at least 12 temples. Whether they were all in use during Paul's time is not known for certain. One of the most infamous was the temple dedicated to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, whose worshipers practiced religious prostitution. About a fourth of a mile north of the theater stood the temple of Asclepius, the god of healing, and in the middle of the city the sixth-century b.c. temple of Apollo was located. In addition, the Jews had established a synagogue; the inscribed lintel of it has been found and placed in the museum at old Corinth.
4. *Its immorality.* Like any large commercial city, Corinth was a center for open and unbridled immorality. The worship of Aphrodite fostered prostitution in the name of religion. At one time 1,000 sacred (priestess) prostitutes served her temple. So widely known did the immorality of Corinth become that the Greek verb "to Corinthianize" came to mean "to practice sexual immorality." In a setting like this it is no wonder that the Corinthian church was plagued with numerous problems.

### **Occasion and Purpose**

Paul had received information from several sources concerning the conditions existing in the church at Corinth. Some members of the household of Chloe had informed him of the factions that had developed in the church (1:11). There were three individuals—Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus—who had come to Paul in Ephesus to make some contribution to his ministry (16:17), but whether these were the ones from Chloe's household we do not know.

Some of those who had come had brought disturbing information concerning moral irregularities in the church (chs. 5–6). Immorality had plagued the Corinthian assembly almost from the beginning. From 5:9–10 it is apparent that Paul had written previously concerning moral laxness. He had urged believers "not to associate with sexually immoral people" (5:9). Because of misunderstanding he now finds it necessary to clarify his instruction (5:10–11) and to urge immediate and drastic action (5:3–5,13).

Other Corinthian visitors had brought a letter from the church that requested counsel on several subjects (see 7:1 and note; cf. 8:1; 12:1; 16:1).

It is clear that, although the church was gifted (see 1:4–7), it was immature and unspiritual (3:1–4). Paul's purposes for writing were: (1) to instruct and restore the church in its areas of weakness, correcting erroneous practices such as divisions (1:10–4:21), immorality (ch. 5; 6:12–20), litigation in pagan courts (6:1–8) and abuse of the Lord's Supper (11:17–34); (2) to correct false teaching concerning the resurrection (ch. 15); and (3) to answer questions addressed to Paul in the letter that had been brought to him (see previous paragraph).

### **Theme**

The letter revolves around the theme of problems in Christian conduct in the church. It thus has to do with progressive sanctification, the continuing development of a holy character. Obviously Paul was personally concerned with the Corinthians' problems, revealing a true pastor's (shepherd's) heart.

## Relevance

This letter continues to be timely for the church today, both to instruct and to inspire. Christians are still powerfully influenced by their cultural environment, and most of the questions and problems that confronted the church at Corinth are still very much with us—problems like immaturity, instability, divisions, jealousy and envy, lawsuits, marital difficulties, sexual immorality and misuse of spiritual gifts. Yet in spite of this concentration on problems, Paul's letter contains some of the most familiar and beloved chapters in the entire Bible—e.g., ch. 13 (on love) and ch. 15 (on resurrection).

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## Outline

- Introduction (1:1–9)
- Divisions in the Church (1:10–4:21)
  - The Fact of the Divisions (1:10–17)
  - The Causes of the Divisions (1:18–4:13)
    1. A wrong conception of the Christian message (1:18–3:4)
    2. A wrong conception of Christian ministry and ministers (3:5–4:5)
    3. A wrong conception of the Christian (4:6–13)
  - The Exhortation to End the Divisions (4:14–21)
- Moral and Ethical Disorders in the Life of the Church (chs. 5–6)
  - Laxity in Church Discipline (ch. 5)
  - Lawsuits before Non-Christian Judges (6:1–11)
  - Sexual Immorality (6:12–20)
- Instruction on Marriage (ch. 7)
  - General Principles (7:1–7)
  - The Problems of the Married (7:8–24)
  - The Problems of the Unmarried (7:25–40)
- Instruction on Questionable Practices (8:1–11:1)
  - The Principles Involved (ch. 8)
  - The Principles Illustrated (ch. 9)
  - A Warning from the History of Israel (10:1–22)
  - The Principles Applied (10:23–11:1)
- Instruction on Public Worship (11:2–14:40)
  - Propriety in Worship (11:2–16)
  - The Lord's Supper (11:17–34)
  - Spiritual Gifts (chs. 12–14)
    1. The test of the gifts (12:1–3)
    2. The unity of the gifts (12:4–11)
    3. The diversity of the gifts (12:12–31a)
    4. The necessity of exercising the gifts in love (12:31b–13:13)
    5. The superiority of prophecy over tongues (14:1–25)
    6. Rules governing public worship (14:26–40)
- Instruction on the Resurrection (ch. 15)
  - The Certainty of the Resurrection (15:1–34)
  - The Consideration of Certain Objections (15:35–57)

- The Concluding Appeal (15:58)
- Conclusion: Practical and Personal Matters (ch. 16)

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