

Introduction to 1 Corinthians

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Author

Paul names himself the author at the beginning of the letter:

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

Sosthenes is listed as a companion of Paul. He may have been the scribe to whom Paul dictated this letter, but that is not certain.

It is possible that this Sosthenes is the ruler of the synagogue in Corinth mentioned in Acts 18:12-17. This Sosthenes evidently replaced Crispus as the ruler of the synagogue after Crispus believed in Jesus as the Messiah and joined the Christian congregation. The Jews of Corinth brought Paul before the proconsul Gallio. When Gallio refused to hear the Jews' complaint and drove them from the tribunal, the people attacked Sosthenes, who had led the Jewish attack on Paul. God could have brought this Sosthenes to believe in Jesus so that he later joined Paul in his travels, but we have no record of this.

The fact that Paul mentioned Sosthenes would seem to mean that the believers in Corinth knew him. If he was the ruler of the synagogue who came to believe in Jesus, he would be well-known to the church members.

Recipients and Background

Paul tells us to whom he is writing in v. 2: "To the church of God that is in Corinth."

Paul went to Corinth on his second missionary journey and stayed there for 18 months (Acts 18:1, 11).

The City of Corinth

The city of Corinth today is rather small. It has only about 2,000 people. The Romans had destroyed Corinth in 146 BC, but Julius Caesar rebuilt the city in 46 BC. By the time of Paul it was a large metropolis of 2,00,000 people or more. It had become one of the most important cities along the main trade route between Rome and the east.

Corinth was a city of great wealth. It was also a place where people from many different countries came to live. Because of this, there were many different religions in Corinth. Pagan temples filled the city.

The main temple of the city was the Temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. There were 1,000 temple prostitutes at this temple and the "worshippers" often used them.

Corinth was a favorite place for sailors to stop for shore leave. It became well-known for its immorality. Because of the corruption and immorality in the city, the Greeks invented a word "*to Corinthianize*" (*to act like a Corinthian*). It referred to prostitution and loose living. Because immorality was so common in Corinth, we can understand why Paul talks so much about marriage and sexual immorality in this letter.

The Church at Corinth

The church in Corinth was founded on Paul's second missionary journey when he stayed in Corinth for 18 months, probably from September 51 to March 53 (see Acts 18:1-17). In Corinth, Paul met Aquila and his wife Priscilla. They were a Jewish couple who had recently come from Rome "because Claudius had command all the Jew to leave Rome" (Acts 18:2). They were tentmakers. Paul stayed with them because he had also worked as a tentmaker. Paul worked with them to support himself. While Paul was in Corinth, he "reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks" that Jesus was the Christ (Acts 18:4-5).

The Jews rejected Paul and the truth, so he left the synagogue and focused on preaching to the Gentiles. He preached at the house of a man named Titius Justus, who was a Gentile worshiper of the true God. His house was next to the synagogue (Acts 18:6-7). The ruler of the synagogue, Crispus, and his entire household believed in the Lord and joined the Christian congregation. Many of the Corinthians who heard Paul also believed and was baptized (Acts 18:8).

It seems that Crispus was then replaced by Sosthenes who led a united attack against Paul before Gallio, the proconsul (governor) of Achaia (Acts 18:12-13). Gallio was proconsul from AD 51 to 52, which helps us date Paul's time in Corinth. Since the complaint related only to the Jewish religion, Gallio refused to hear the matter or even let Paul speak (Acts 18:14-16).

Paul had a long and successful ministry in Corinth, but his mission was not to settle in one place. Paul left with Aquila and Priscilla and set sail to go back to Jerusalem, going through Asia Minor again on his way back to Jerusalem.

In Ephesus they met Apollos, who came from Alexandria. Apollos was teaching accurately about Jesus, but "he knew only the baptism of John" (Acts 18:25). Priscilla and Aquila "explained to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26). He wanted to go to Achaia instead of going with them to Jerusalem, so the brothers encouraged him to go to "the disciples":

Acts 18:27-28 And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed..,

Luke does not say specifically say who these disciples were, but Paul had just left Corinth, which is in Achaia. In this letter to the church in Corinth, Paul mentions Apollos, so it seems likely that they sent Apollos to Corinth to serve as the pastor and evangelist there (Acts 18:27-28):

1 Corinthians 3:6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

When Apollos arrived, Luke tells us that "he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus" (Acts 18:28). It is possible that Sosthenes, the new ruler of the synagogue, came to believe in Jesus through Apollos's preaching and then he later joined Paul in Ephesus, where Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians.

Date of Writing

This letter was probably written during Paul's third missionary journey, during his 27-month stay in Ephesus from October 53 to January 56:

1 Corinthians 16:7-9 For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

Occasion and Purpose

It had been about four years since Paul had been in Corinth. While Paul was preaching and teaching in Ephesus, he was disturbed by reports from the household of Chloe about quarrels in the church in Corinth:

1 Corinthians 1:11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers.

The church sent three men with a letter from the church asking Paul several questions:

1 Corinthians 16:17-18 I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such people.

1 Corinthians 7:1 Now concerning the matters about which you wrote...

Paul wrote this letter to deal with the problems the people from Chloe's household reported and to answer the questions the Corinthians had asked.

Paul also wrote to correct a misunderstanding the Corinthians had about what Paul said in a previous letter:

1 Corinthians 5:9-11 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

We do not have this previous letter written by Paul. This should not trouble us. Evidently the Holy Spirit did not see fit to preserve this letter. It was a letter intended only for the Corinthian church at that time, and not one that God wanted us to have as well.

Paul sent the letter we call 1 Corinthians with Timothy. Timothy would then be able to report back to Paul how the Corinthians received his letter:

1 Corinthians 4:15-17 For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.

1 Corinthians 16:10-11 When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers.

Content

There are a number of problems that threatened the Corinthian congregation which Paul wrote to address:

- The congregation was in danger of splitting into factions following different pastors or missionaries:

1 Corinthians 1:12-17 What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

- Blatant incest had taken place in the congregation:

1 Corinthian 5:1 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.

- Christians were suing one another in civil court:

1 Corinthians 6:1-2, 6 When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ...but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?

- Sexual immorality in general was a problem for the Corinthian believers because they lived in a city that was so well-known for sexual “freedom”:

1 Corinthians 6:13, 16-18 “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food”—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body...Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.” But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.

- They had questions about marriage and divorce:

1 Corinthians 7:1-2 Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

1 Corinthians 7:8-9 To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

1 Corinthians 7:10-11 To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

- There were issues involving Christian liberty in the matter of food that had been offered to idols and and problems with the abuse of the liberty we have in Christ:

1 Corinthians 8:9 But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

- There were problems with how they celebrated the Lord’s Supper:

1 Corinthians 11:20-22 When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the

church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

1 Corinthians 11:27-29 Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

- Their worship was disrupted by the misuse of the gifts of the Spirit (chapters 12-14), especially the gift of tongues.
- There was false teaching concerning the resurrection of the dead (chapter 15).

These matters were of great concern to Paul. This letter contains practical instruction concerning many aspects of congregational life both for the Corinthian church as well as our own churches.

Outline

1. Introduction (1:1-9)
2. Paul address the problems at Corinth (1:10-15:58)
 - a. Factions (1:10-4:21)
 - b. Sexual immorality (5:1-7:40)
 - c. Christian Liberty (8:1-11:1)
 - d. Public Worship (11:2-14:40)
 - e. The Resurrection (15:1-58)
3. Personal Matters and Conclusion (16:1-24)

(this overview is based on a study prepared by Pastor Nathanael Mayhew, <http://atlanta.clclutheran.org/booksofthebibleoverview.html>)