

## I. Corinth

Ancient city: evidence of settlements in the location going far back in history, but present Corinth traces its origins to about 1350 BC, before the Trojan War.



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Commercially strategic location: the “isthmus” linked mainland Greece with the Peloponnese (the large southern peninsula of Greece) and provided a link between the Aegean and Ionian Seas, offering safer (and swifter) passage to ship goods to Rome:

“In Paul’s day large ships would transfer their cargoes to land vehicles that would cart them from the Corinthian Gulf, west of the isthmus, to the Saronic Gulf, east of the isthmus, or vice versa. There stevedores would reload them onto other ships. If a ship was small enough, they would drag the whole vessel across the four-and-a-half-mile isthmus, from one gulf to the other. This did away with the long and dangerous voyage around the Peloponnese by way of Cape Malea.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), 1 Cor 1.1.

<sup>2</sup> Constable, 1 Cor 1.1.

**Location produced:**

1. Wealth
2. People (travelers, merchants, sailors)
3. Vice – the anonymity of the foreign city

“Old Corinth had gained such a reputation for sexual vice that Aristophanes (*ca.* 450–385 B.C.) coined the verb *korinthiazō* (= to act like a Corinthian, i.e., to commit fornication).”<sup>3</sup>

4. Religions (all kinds)

Fee mentions 26 sacred places in Corinth devoted to “many gods” (Roman and Greek pantheon) and “many lords” (mystery religions) — see 1 Cor 8.5.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cor 8.5 For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords,

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**Roman period:**

City destroyed by the Romans when they rebelled against Macedonian rule in 146 BC. In 46 BC, Julius Caesar reestablished the city as a Roman colony called *Colonia Laus Julia Corinthus*. Settled with Roman veterans and freedmen, patterned after Roman cities.

Capital of Achaia, which included the Peloponnese and most of the rest of mainland Greece. As the capital of a province, the Roman governor resided there. In Acts 18.12, Paul appeared before the governor, Gallio, at the *bema* [judgement] seat there.

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Fee, 3.

## II. Authorship and circumstances

The authorship of Paul is undisputed, even by liberal critics.

- Paul arrived in Corinth in approximately AD 50 or 51 (Ac 18.1)
- Aquila and Priscilla were already in Corinth, having left Rome by Claudius decree in AD 49. “Since no mention is made of their conversions, they were probably Christians when Paul met them.”<sup>5</sup>
- Paul arriving after little success in Athens and opposition in Macedonia (esp. Thessalonica), but God promised “many people” in Corinth (Ac 18.10)
- Paul left Corinth in the fall of AD 52, taking Aquila and Priscilla with him as far as Ephesus (Ac 18.18-28)
- During Paul’s subsequent ministry in Ephesus, AD 53-55/56, Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians (now lost) (1 Cor 5.9)

1 Cor 5.9 ¶ I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people;

- Later, Paul learned that his first letter was misunderstood, and that there were additional problems in Corinth (1 Co 1.11). Near this time, an official delegation from Corinth arrived with questions (1 Co 16.17)
- Paul wrote 1 Corinthians in response to the situation and the questions, approx. AD 54/55
- Paul sent Timothy to Corinth (perhaps bearing the letter) (1 Co 4.7, 16.10), but apparently the Corinthians remained hostile
- Paul took the time to visit Corinth himself, calling it “the painful visit” (2 Cor 1.15, 2.1, cf. 13.1)
- Back in Ephesus, Paul sent another letter by Titus, a “grievous letter” (2 Cor 2.4, 7.8-9)
- Paul left Ephesus after the silversmith’s riot (Ac 19), heading for Corinth by way of Macedonia, hoping to see Titus with news from Corinth, initially not finding him, but rejoicing that the “grievous letter” was well received (2 Cor 2.12-13, 7.5)

<sup>5</sup> David K. Lowery, “1 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 504–5.

- Prior to arriving in Corinth, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians; partly as a pastoral letter (ch. 1-9) and partly in response to news of further problems in Corinth (ch. 10-13).
- When Paul arrived in Corinth, all was well, with Paul staying for three months at the end of the Third Missionary Journey (Ac 20.1-4) [Paul wrote Romans at this point, during his stay in Corinth.]

### III. Message of the Corinthian epistles

G. G. Findlay says 1 Corinthians is *“the epistle of the cross in its social application.”*<sup>6</sup>

“First Corinthians provides a glimpse of life inside one first-century church, and far from saintly it was. Yet that is the reason Paul wrote this letter—to make positional sanctification practical.”<sup>7</sup>

We could call 2 Corinthians *the epistle revealing the heart of pastoral application.*

Three main topics in 1 Corinthians

1. To heal divisions and correct contentions in answer to the report from Chloe’s people (1-6)
2. To answer specific questions raised in a letter from the Corinthians (7-16)
3. To emphatically defend the doctrine of the resurrection, perhaps the key problem in Corinth, as Paul makes it the climax of the epistle.

The epistle shows “more clearly than any other portion of the New Testament, Christianity in conflict with heathenism. We see what method Paul adopted in founding the church in the midst of a refined and corrupt people; how he answered questions of conscience arising out of the relations of Christians to the heathen around them. The cases may never occur again, but the principles involved in their decision, are of perpetual obligation, and serve as lights to the church in all ages.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> G. G. Findlay, “St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians,” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. William Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, n.d.), 739.

<sup>7</sup> Lowery, “1 Corinthians, BKCNT,” 506.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), xx–xxi.

## Three main topics in 2 Corinthians

1. To defend Paul's ministry against the hostility and suspicions raised by false teachers present in the Corinthian church (1-7)
2. To exhort Corinthian readiness for the offering they already pledged to support (8-9)
3. To defend Paul's apostleship and denounce those who opposed him and consequently also opposed Christ (10-13)

The remarkable thing to note is that despite Paul's strong language, the Corinthian church preserved these two letters for the rest of the church to share.