

# The Church of God at Corinth

**Text:** 1 Corinthians 1:1-3

## Introduction:

1. In this message we will seek to set the scene for the study of the Book of 1 Corinthians.
2. 1 Corinthians is the longest Epistle in the New Testament. 1 and 2 Corinthians form one-fourth of the New Testament. Paul bares his soul more in his letters to the church at Corinth than in any others. He gives many details of his life, ministry, and revelations.
3. For this introductory message, we will consider some key matters that are pertinent to our study of this wonderful Epistle.

## I. THE AUTHORSHIP OF CORINTHIANS (1 Cor. 1:1, 16:21)

### A. The Person who wrote Corinthians

1. Pauline authorship is crystal clear, Paul's name appears at the beginning and end of the Epistle (1:1, 16:21). He also claims to have founded the Corinthian church.
2. Paul's name occurs 8 times in the Epistle (1:1, 12, 13, 3:4, 5, 22; 16:21)

### B. The Period when Corinthians was written

1. Paul wrote the Epistle approximately A.D. 55 from Ephesus during his great Asia Minor ministry (3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey). The church at Corinth had been established by the Apostle Paul during his second missionary journey in approximately A.D. 51.
2. Between A.D. 55-56 Paul wrote his three major Epistles – 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians in A.D. 55 and Romans in A.D. 56.

### C. The Purpose for which Corinthians was written

1. Pastor Richard Hester in his New Testament Bible History course suggests three main purposes for writing.
  - a. To deal with carnality and flagrant sins being permitted in the church and attempt to build a unity.
  - b. To instruct the church about doctrinal issues causing confusion.
  - c. To strengthen the hope of the church to look forward to Christ's coming and the resurrection of the saints.
2. Robert Gromacki, in his excellent commentary, offers the following summary of the purposes for writing.
  - a. Paul wrote to correct the problems mentioned to him in the personal reports (Chap. 1-6). He rebuked the existence of church factions and tried to bring unity out of division (1:10-4:21). He then attempted to discipline in absentia the fornicators in their midst (5:1-13). He also tried to prevent warring church members from going to civil court against each other (6:1-8).
  - b. The rest of the book deals with the questions raised in the letter which Paul received from the church at Corinth (7:1). With the letter probably before him, Paul logically moved from one issue to another. He marked his movement and change of subject with the key introductory word "Now" (See 7:1, 25; 8:1; 11:2, 17;

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12:1; 15:12; 16:1). In this part of the letter Paul answered their questions concerning the necessity and problems of marriage (7:1-24); the status of virgins and widows (7:25-40), the application of Christian liberty to the eating of meat sacrificed to idols (8:1-11:1), the conduct of women in the church (11:2-16), the order of the communion service (11:17-34), the nature and use of spiritual gifts – especially those of speaking in tongues and prophecy (12:1-14:40), the necessity and nature of the resurrection body (15:1-58), and the financial collection for the poor saints at Jerusalem (16:1-4). In addition, he wanted to announce to them his plans to visit Corinth after a tour of the Macedonian churches (16:5-18). He then closed by extending greetings to them from the Asian churches and brethren (16:19-24).

### II. THE AREA OF CORINTH (1 Cor. 1:2)

Of all the cities we find in the New Testament, Corinth probably most closely resembles Western Society today.

Consider the background of Corinth...

#### A. Geographically

1. The city was located on a narrow strip of land, called an isthmus<sup>1</sup>, connecting the Peloponnesus with northern Greece. This isthmus also formed the land bridge between the Aegean and the Adriatic seas. Located forty miles west of Athens, Corinth was the capital of this southern province called Achaia.
2. The city was located on the plain below an 1,800-foot (550m) mountain called the Acrocorinth on which the city's acropolis resided. The acropolis was a heavily fortified citadel where the city withstood enemy attacks. The walls were 2,000 meters in length. There is a spring within the walls to supply water.<sup>2</sup>
3. There were two harbors that served Corinth: Lechaëum, a mile and a half to the north of the Gulf of Corinth, and Cenchrea (Phebe's home, Rom. 16:1), about four miles to the east of the Saronic Gulf. It was quicker, cheaper and safer to cross between the seas at this point than to go all the way around the southern tip of the Grecian peninsula, adding hundreds of miles to the journey and risking the rocky coasts and storms that often brewed in that part of the Mediterranean.<sup>3</sup>

#### B. Politically

1. The city of Corinth was a chief city of Greece in the days of Alexander the Great in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. In 146 BC, it was conquered and destroyed by Rome under the Roman general Mummius. In 44 BC it was rebuilt by Julius Caesar and declared a free city, regaining its former splendour and prominence. The new

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<sup>1</sup> A narrow strip of land, bordered on both sides by water, connecting two larger bodies of land.

<sup>2</sup> D. Cloud commentary on Corinthian Epistles

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

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city was laid out according to the Roman grid system with a *Cardo Maximus* (main north-south boulevard).<sup>4</sup> By the time Paul arrived in the city (A.D. 50-52), the city had grown to a population of 500,000.

2. Corinth was capital of the Roman province of Achaia. The Romans divided Greece into two provinces: Macedonia to the north and Achaia to the south. Corinth is located about halfway between Athens and Sparta, the distance to these cities being about 45 miles.<sup>5</sup>
3. The city's slaves were estimated to make up 60 percent of the total population. The class distinctions in Corinth probably explain what was going on with the Lord's Table in 11:21.

### C. Commercially

1. Because of its strategic location, Corinth was a major trade hub for the flow of goods via land and sea.
2. The city grew very wealthy through its commercial advantages. It was located on the important travel routes from north to south and east to west. Much of its wealth was derived from taxing goods passing through its territory.<sup>6</sup>
3. "The merchandise of Italy, Sicily, and the western nations, was landed at Lechaemum on the west; and that of the islands of the Aegean sea, of Asia Minor and of the Phoenicians, and other oriental nations, at Cenchrea on the east. The city of Corinth thus became the mart of Asia and Europe." (Albert Barnes)
4. The Isthmian games were also held at Corinth. They began in 594 BC and were devoted to Poseidon, brother of Zeus and god of the sea and of horses. There was a large temple complex at the location devoted to this god.

### D. Religiously

Corinth was known for its:

1. Philosophy – Corinth was known for its learning and literature. It attracted some of the famous "thinkers" of that time period.
  - a. Cicero, the Roman poet and philosopher, called it "the light of all Greece".
  - b. Matthew Poole writes, "They were anciently famous for pagan learning, and had amongst them Stoics and Epicureans, who laughed at the resurrection of the body, and looked upon incest, adultery, and fornication, as very venial (excusable) things, if at all unlawful."
  - c. Richard Hester writes, "With its position, it is no surprise that Corinth became a major cosmopolitan melting pot. Because of their cosmopolitan, international mentality of open mindedness to everything, Corinth was known for new ideas, fashions and liberal thinking. The East met the West in Corinth. The Corinthians were exposed to every conceivable new idea, philosophy, and religious belief the world had to offer."

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

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- d. The Apostle Paul had to tackle the destructive influence of worldly wisdom in the church at Corinth (See Chap. 1-2).
2. Idolatry – like other pagan cities of that time, Corinth had its share of pagan temples and shrines.
  - a. There were temples to Jupiter, Helios (Sun), Neptune, Apollo, Diana, Minerva, Hera, Sarapis, and others. There was also a temple of Octavia devoted to the Imperial Cult of Caesar worship.<sup>7</sup>
  - b. The principle pagan deity and shrine in Corinth was the goddess Aphrodite and the temple dedicated to her worship atop the Acropolis, a rock plateau rising perpendicularly 1,800 feet (550m) above the city of Corinth.
  - c. Much of the wealth and evils of the city centred around this temple employing about 1,000 temple prostitutes (according to the historian Strabo), who were there to aid in the “worship” of Aphrodite. This “religious shrine” became a “tourist attraction” which greatly contributed to its wealth.
  - d. In such a morally polluted atmosphere, there is no surprise that one of the major problems in the Corinthian church was immorality (See Chap. 5).

### E. Morally

1. Corinth was renowned for moral corruption. As a major crossroads, multitudes of businessmen, traders, craftsmen, seamen, and all other sorts of travellers passed through Corinth with money to spent on its vices. **It was the Las Vegas of its day.**<sup>8</sup>
2. B.H. Carroll writes, “No place on earth was more debauched. They worshiped their gods with the most shameful orgies of obscenity and vice. It was while Paul was there, knowing the degradation of the heathen countries, and particularly of their worship, that he wrote that terrible indictment contained in Romans 1, where he describes the corruption of the heathen nations who had no knowledge of God.”
3. Adam Clarke writes, “So notorious was this city for such conduct, that the very word to *corinthize*, signified to act the prostitute, and a Corinthian damsel meant a harlot or common woman.”
4. The city had a reputation for vulgar materialism. Plato used the expressions “Corinthian girl” to refer to a prostitute. Aristophanes coined the verb ‘*korinthiazomai*’ for ‘fornication’. The Corinthian epistles account for 55 percent of all uses of the root word for ‘fornication’ in Paul’s Epistles, and 27 percent of all NT usage.<sup>9</sup>
5. Some of the Corinthian believers had been saved out of very immoral lives. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 “Know ye not that the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> R Hester, New Testament Bible History

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unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. **And such were some of you:** but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.”

6. Paul wrote Romans from Corinth and he describes the kind of perversion in Romans 1 that existed in Corinth, and other pagan cities of that time.
7. Note: Paul did not preach a “God is ok with your immoral lifestyle” message to the Corinthian culture. He preached God’s mind on human sexuality!

### III. THE ASSEMBLY AT CORINTH (1 Cor. 1:2; ACTS 18:1-17)

Consider **five truths** concerning the establishment of the church in Philippi:

#### A. The Context of the Church Plant (Acts 18:1)

1. Paul travels to Corinth after his ministry in Athens where he delivered his famous sermon to the pagans on Mars Hill (17:22-34).
2. Paul’s ministry in Corinth took place during his second missionary journey (refer chart).

#### B. The Companions of the Church Plant (Vs. 2-3)

1. A providential partnership (Vs. 2)
  - a. Aquilla and Priscilla had relocated to Corinth because of an antisemitic decree from the Roman Emperor Claudius banishing all Jews from Rome in A.D. 49. Ultimately God used this to move this dear couple to Corinth where they would be a help and blessing to Paul. They were either already believers before they met Paul or he led them to Christ.
  - b. We get a sense for how special this couple was to Paul in the ministry from his salutation to them in the Epistle to the Romans, written 1 year after 1 Corinthians. Romans 16:3-4 “Greet **Priscilla and Aquila** my helpers in Christ Jesus: Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.”
2. A practical partnership (Vs. 3)
  - a. They were both of the same craft which was tent making. Many travellers who visited Corinth stayed in tent encampments. This was a means of financial support for the Apostle Paul as he planted the church. He was able to find a Jewish couple who owned A & P Tents Inc. Aquilla and Priscilla became valuable co-workers in the Gospel.
  - b. Note: If you are a pioneer church planter, bear in mind you may have to do some tent making on the side to help support yourself if there is not sufficient financial support from other churches.

#### C. The Converts of the Church Plant (Vs. 4-8)

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### 1. The Preaching for Conversions (Vs. 4-6)

Note four characteristics of the Apostle Paul's preaching. It was:

#### a. Persuasive Preaching (Vs. 4)

There was:

- i. Argumentation – 'reasoned', comes from the Greek word *διαλεγομαι* (dialegomai) which means "to say thoroughly, that is, discuss in argument or exhortation" (Strong). It means to discourse (RWP). It forms the basis of our English word 'dialogue'. Paul's reasoning was from the Scriptures. Acts 17:2 "And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them **out of the Scriptures**".
- ii. Appeal – 'persuaded', comes from the Greek word *πειθο* (peitho) meaning "to convince".

#### b. Passionate Preaching (Vs. 5a)

- i. Paul was stirred in heart – "pressed in the spirit". Paul's heart was moved for those he was seeking to reach. We need that inner heart stirring for the lost we are seeking to reach. This stirring is wrought in us by the Holy Spirit.
- ii. Paul testified with his lips – "and testified to the Jews".

#### c. Pointed Preaching (Vs. 5b)

- i. Christ was the grand theme of Paul's preaching. He reminded the Corinthians of this in his first Epistle to them.
- ii. 1 Cor. 1:23 "But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness;"
- iii. 1 Cor. 2:1-2 "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified."
- iv. We preach not a religion but a Person!

### 2. The People Converted (Vs. 6-8)

There were those who:

#### a. Rejected the message (Vs. 6). The majority of the Jews rejected the Gospel message. The Gospel was to the "Jew first" (Rom. 1:16) but upon their rejection of it, Paul turns his attention to the Gentiles.

#### b. Received the message (Vs. 7-8)

- i. The named converts (Vs. 7-8a) – there were a couple of key converts that are mentioned by name. The first was Justus (Vs. 7) whose house was right next to the synagogue. A church was born right under the shadow of the synagogue with its vehement opposition! The second was Crispus (Vs. 8) who was the ruler of the synagogue. He came to saving faith in Christ ('believed') along with his whole household.
- ii. The number of converts (Vs. 8b) – there were 'many' others from Corinth who heard, believed and were baptized (note the order!) Most of these were from the

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poorer walks of life (1 Cor. 1:26-28). Praise God for the precious saints of God who may be “nobodies” as far as the world is concerned but who are “somebodies” to God.

### D. The Consolation during the Church Plant (Vs. 9-11)

The Lord spoke to Paul in a very personal way to strengthen and encourage him to continue the Gospel ministry in Corinth. Paul needed this word of encouragement as he sought to establish a church in such a satanic stronghold! The opposition must have been so intense! It was a promise of:

1. Peace – “be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace” (Vs. 9). We get a window into how Paul was feeling as he ministered in Corinth from 1 Corinthians 2:3 – “And I was with you in **weakness**, and in **fear**, and in **much trembling**.” The Lord encouraged Paul to keep on preaching the Gospel despite his fears.
2. Preservation – “For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee”. The Lord was present with Paul and would protect him from the dangers he faced. This promise would have brought him much comfort when he was dragged before the judgment seat (Vs. 12-16)
3. Prosperity – “for I have much people in this city.” The Lord assured Paul that there were many more people who were going to be saved in the city of Corinth. This would encourage Paul to keep on going!

### E. The Conflicts facing the Church Plant (Vs. 12-17)

Whenever the work of the Gospel is making inroads into Satan’s kingdom, there will be opposition!

1. The accusation (Vs. 12-13) – they accused Paul of teaching worship contrary to the law. Every religious flavor was tolerated in Corinth but all of a sudden, the Gospel was deemed illegal!
2. The acquittal (Vs. 14-16) – the Lord overruled in the situation and the case was thrown out of court by Gallio!

## IV. THE AIM OF CORINTHIANS

### A. The Theme Stated: The Correction of Carnality

First Corinthians is the “trouble shooting” epistle and not a systematic presentation of a major theme. Think of some of the problems facing the Corinthian church. The following list is adapted from Denis Lyle

1. They were making too much of human leaders (1:12)
2. They were infatuated with worldly wisdom (1:20)
3. They were like babies spiritually (3:3)
4. They were acting carnally (3:1-4)
5. They were defiling the church (3:17)
6. They were puffed up in pride (4:18)
7. They were tolerating immorality in the church (5:1)
8. They were suing each other in heathen courts (6:1)
9. They were confused about marriage (7:1)
10. They were abusing the doctrine of Christian liberty (8:9)
11. They were making a mockery of the Lord’s Supper (11:30)
12. They were corrupting the gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially tongues (14)

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13. They were confused on the doctrine of the resurrection (15)
14. It has been said that if sins were horses, this church could have filled many stables!
15. Hester writes, "It's hard to imagine a church with such diverse problems as those at Corinth: popularity contests for preachers, immorality in the church with impunity, court cases, marital issues, arguments over spiritual gifts, men out of place, women out of place, doctrinal confusion over the resurrection – just to name the major problems."
16. Dr Alan Cairns said, "*the city was infecting the church more than the church was influencing the city.*"
17. Note: No church is problem free. The key is that problems get dealt with Scripturally as they arise. Paul's Epistle demonstrates that carnality, worldliness, moral and doctrinal leaven must not be tolerated in the local church. It must be dealt with firmly, thoroughly and biblically for the spiritual wellbeing of the church and its members. No church should be comfortable with its carnality!

### **B. The Theme Summarised: Sanctification**

Richard Hester writes, "Many subjects are dealt with in this letter but the main underlying theme is sanctification. Now that the Corinthians believers were saved, Paul wanted their lives to accurately reflect their position as children of God."

## **V. THE ARRANGEMENT (OUTLINE) OF CORINTHIANS**

### **A. Denis Lyle's Outline**

#### **I. CONCERNING DIVISIONS IN THE CHURCH (CHAPS. 1-4)**

There was:

- A. Superiority (1:11-17) – Here is a local church hopelessly divided into four groups, with each group claiming superiority over the others. "Our man is the best man", was the concept.
- B. Philosophy (1:18-2:13) – The Corinthians were favouring human wisdom rather than the theology of the Cross. The world's philosophy is very dangerous to the Christian!
- C. Immaturity (2:14-3:7) – in this section Paul divides all men into three categories: Natural, Spiritual and Carnal.
- D. Accountability (3:8-23) – The believers at Corinth had forgotten they would one day give an account at the judgment seat of Christ. At the Bema seat, our service will be reviewed (1 Cor. 3:11-15) and our Motives will be reviewed (1 Cor. 4:5).
- E. Flattery (4:1-21) – They were "puffed up" (4:6). It is a picture of the blacksmith's bellows being filled with air or a picture of a balloon ready to burst. The picture is of spiritual pride and arrogance.

#### **II. CONCERNING DISORDERS IN THE CHURCH (CHAPS. 5-6)**

There were two serious social problems in the church at Corinth. There was:



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- A. A Moral Problem (Chap. 5)
- B. A Material Problem (Chap. 6) – It is bad enough when believers squabble. It is worse when they squabble before the unsaved. It is worse still when they squabble over the matter of money.

### III. CONCERNING DIFFICULTIES IN THE CHURCH (CHAPS. 7-11)

Four basic difficulties surfaced which Paul had to resolve for the believers at Corinth. There was difficulty concerning:

- A. Marriage (Chap. 7) – Marriage is intended to be a holy wedlock not holy deadlock!
- B. Meats (Chaps. 8 & 10)
- C. Ministers (Chap. 9) – The Corinthians had a problem with Paul's apostolic authority. Indeed they were judging him.
- D. Meetings (Chap. 11) – There was as Alan Cairns puts it, "a radical feminism" in the church at Corinth. "Men and women are equal when it comes to Grace, but they are not equal when it comes to Place. They are equal when it comes to Acceptance with God, but they are not equal when it comes to Authority from God. God has given the headship to man." There was also a problem with their approach to the Lord's Supper (See explanation on Pg. 134)

### IV. CONCERNING DIVERSITY IN THE CHURCH (CHAPS. 12-14)

Paul addresses the subject of spiritual gifts.

- A. The Endowment of the Gifts (Chap. 12)  
The gifts are distributed:
  - 1. Individually
  - 2. Diversely
  - 3. Sovereignly
- A. The Energy of the Gifts (Chap. 13)  
Dr. H. Willmington writes, "The spiritual gifts may be thought of as God's divine bricks to be used in the construction of His holy and earthly temple. In the analogy, love serves as the 'celestial cement' which holds the bricks together."
- B. The Exercise of the Gifts (Chap. 14)

### V. CONCERNING DOCTRINE IN THE CHURCH (CHAPS. 15-16)

Some in Corinth were denying:

- A. The Doctrine of the Resurrection (Chap. 15) In verses 12-19, Paul takes time to ring the 7 "ifs". Seven tragic results occur if there is no resurrection. To deny the resurrection is to deny the faith.
- B. The Duty of the Redeemed (Chap. 16)  
Regarding the collection for the needs of the poor in Jerusalem (Acts 11:29 and Romans 15:25), and regarding stewardship generally, Paul says, in verse 2, that we should give:
  - 1. Periodically – "the first day of the week"

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2. Proportionally – “as God hath prospered”
3. Purposefully – “that there be no collections when I come”

### B. Wiersbe’s Outline

- I. **DIVISION IN THE CHURCH (Chap. 1 – 4)**
  - A. Chp 1 – Christ not divided
  - B. Chp 2 – Power of Gospel not from human source
  - C. Chp 3 – True spiritual foundation
  - D. Chp 4 – The ministry is stewardship
  
- II. **DISORDERS IN THE CHURCH (Chap. 5-6)**
  - A. Chp 5 -Discipline in church
  - B. Chp 6a – Resolving personal disputes
  - C. Chp 6b – Issues about sexual purity
  
- III. **DOCTRINAL DIFFICULTIES IN THE CHURCH (7-16)**
  - A. Issues relating to Marriage, celibacy and divorce (7)
  - B. Issues concerning Christian liberty (8-10)
  - C. Issues of male/female headship and order at the Lord’s Table (11)
  - D. Issues concerning spiritual gifts (12-14)
  - E. Issues concerning the resurrection (15)

**Conclusion:** Remember the two problems we all face. We need the church in the world, but we need to keep the world out of the church. Horatius Bonar said, “I looked for the church and I found it in the world: I looked for the world and I found it in the church”. May God help us to be in the world as a witness but to also keep the world out of the church.