

PAUL AND THE CORINTHIANS

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### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to a) provide a background description of the city of Corinth, b) describe Paul's visits to Corinth using material from Acts and 1-2 Corinthians, c) identify the issues and topics addressed in 1-2 Corinthians, organized by topics, and d) identify the major themes in 1-2 Corinthians.

### Background

*The City of Corinth.* In Roman times, Corinth was a city of wealth, luxury, and immorality. It had no rivals as a city of vice. It occupied a very strategic geographical position because land traffic between the north and south of Achaia had to pass through Corinth. Much of the commerce between Rome and the East also passed through Corinth and brought thriving businesses to the great city.<sup>1</sup>

The expression "live like a Corinthian" implied a life of indulgence, debauchery, with no compunction. Plato used the term "Corinthian girl" as a euphemism for a prostitute. Since much of the city's wealth was associated with its harbors and the sea, the worship of Poseidon was prevalent. Many of its inhabitants became so wealthy that they developed a spirit of fierce independence. This attitude must have played a significant part in the development of factions within the church. At the heart of the city was the Temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and its influence reached deeply into the Corinthian church. The Temple employed over 1,000

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<sup>1</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Zondervan Publishing, 1963) 182-84

prostitutes as part of its “religious rites.” When Paul arrived on the scene at Corinth during his second missionary journey, many new converts had already been immersed in this lifestyle with immorality being a common way of life. In many ways Corinth was probably much like our modern-day Reno or Las Vegas.

At its peak, Corinth had about 200,000 citizens, plus 500,000 slaves. Most of the citizens were either descendants of Roman colonists, Greeks, or Jews who exercised the right to govern their internal affairs (cf. Acts 18:8, 17).<sup>2</sup> Slaves were also most likely part of the Corinthian church. Additionally, the city had many other ethnic groups which were either passing through or had decided to make Corinth their home. It was, in fact, a melting pot of ethnicity, religions, and philosophies. This mix of various ethnic groups that existed within the church is revealed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:13, and it probably produced an improper tolerance to other beliefs making them more easily influenced by false teachers.

*Paul’s visits to Corinth.* Paul visited Corinth for the first time on his second missionary journey around A.D. 51 (Acts 18). It was here that he met Aquila and Priscilla, fellow Christians and like Paul, were tent makers. They opened their home to Paul and he remained with them for a year and a half (Acts 18:3, 11). He had just come from Athens, where he was not well received, especially with regard to his preaching on the subject of the resurrection of the dead at the meeting of the Areopagus (Acts 17:16—18:1). While in Corinth, Paul supported himself with his skills as a tentmaker so that his motives as a preacher would be above suspicion. Paul made

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<sup>2</sup> Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid, Dictionary of Paul and His Letters (Downers Grove, Illinois; Intervarsity Press, 1993) 173.

every effort to prevent false accusations which might have undermined the validity of his message.

He was joined by Silas and Timothy, shortly after his arrival, and received the good news about their recent visit to the church at Thessalonica (Acts 18:5; 1 Thess. 3:6). Unfortunately, The response to Paul's preaching in Corinth was far less favorable, especially by the Jews who opposed him with abusiveness. As a result, he turned his attention to the Gentiles for his remaining time in Corinth (Acts 18:6). At this point Paul stopped preaching in the synagogue and was invited to the house of Titius Justus whose home was next to the synagogue (Acts 18:7). It was here that Paul's message fell on more fertile ground as Crispus, the synagogue ruler, his entire household, and many others believed in the Lord (Acts 18:8). Subsequently, Crispus was baptized by Paul (1 Cor 1:14).

While in Corinth a man named Gallio, the older brother of the Roman philosopher, Seneca, became the ruler of Achaia. It was to him that the Jews accused Paul of preaching a religion that was contrary to Roman law. Gallio, however, refused to admit the case to trial. He apparently viewed the dispute between the Jews and Paul as a disagreement on the interpretation of Jewish law (Acts 18:12-16). Shortly after this, the Greeks vented their anger against the Jews by seizing and beating Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue (Acts 18:17). Because Gallio showed no concern over the incident, his action implied that Paul's preaching could not be interpreted as an offense against the Roman law. From this experience Paul gained a new sense of freedom in preaching the gospel. Paul then left Corinth and sailed for Ephesus, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:18).

There is scriptural evidence that Paul may have made a brief second visit to Corinth while in Ephesus on his third missionary journey since he makes reference to preparing for a third visit to Corinth in 2 Corinthians 12:14 and 13:1.

### Issues and topics

Paul's letters to the Corinthians appear to be random writings about different topics, jumping from one to another, but upon closer inspection we discover an overall theme and not simply a "laundry list" of issues. From each of the topics and corresponding issues the theme of self-sufficient knowledge without heartfelt love is observed. The topics Paul addresses in 1-2 Corinthians may be grouped as follows:

*Topic #1: The problem of church factionalism (1 Cor 3).* After giving his usual greeting and thanksgiving to God, Paul moves directly into the first issue of factions within this church. He appeals to them to agree with one another so that existing divisions will cease (1 Cor 3:10). Paul is informed by "some from Chloe's household," that factions and quarrels were dividing this young body of believers. He points to the specific issue of some who were followers of Paul, some of Apollos, some of Cephas, and still others who were "followers of Christ." A false sense of allegiance, by these young believers, to these early church leaders appears to have gone astray. Paul argues that all believers are to identify themselves solely with the undivided Christ (1 Cor 1:13), and not to take baptism as a means for creating a factional loyalty to the one who did the baptizing.

Paul follows this argument with an explanation of the underlying root-cause, that being wisdom dictates an attitude of humility, not pride or boasting (1 Cor 1:18-25). Like Jeremiah (9:23-24), the Corinthians were to boast only in the Lord (1 Cor 1:31). The wisdom Paul describes here is not human wisdom that tends to make one boastful, but wisdom that comes

from the Spirit (1 Cor 3:6-16). Paul intentionally avoided any possibility of appearing to be wise by using impressive words when preaching, so that God's power would be seen and that their faith would rest on it alone (1 Cor 2:4-10).

The second issue Paul addresses regarding factionalism is spiritual immaturity (1 Cor 3). Another root-cause for the divisions within this church was spiritual immaturity. Using the metaphors of milk and meat (βρῶμα *broma*), Paul explains how because the Corinthian believers were spiritual infants he had to feed them with "milk" since they were not ready for "meat." The implication may have been that because they were still operating under an inferior kind of human wisdom they could not see God's reasons and methods for raising up men such as Paul, Apollos, and Cephas to build the church (1 Cor 3:5-9).

After stressing the need for unity in the church and the need to grow in God's wisdom, Paul now focuses on the third issue which was a clarification of his role as a minister (ὑπηρέτης *huperetes*), along with Apollos and Cephas (1 Cor 4). He makes it clear that believers are not to view them as leaders of factions, but as servants of Christ entrusted with the "secret things of Christ."<sup>3</sup>

*Topic #2: The problem of church disorder (1 Cor 5—6).* Perhaps under the paradigm of "tolerance" the members of this church were fully accepting the situation where a man had an incestuous relationship with his father's wife.<sup>4</sup> The mix of various ethnic groups within the church at Corinth, and the need to find social compatibility, may have produced this sin-tolerant attitude toward incest. The effect of this situation was that it could eventually infect the entire

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase "secret things of Christ" (1 Cor 2:7; 4:1) was referring to his offer of salvation to all people, something originally unknown to humanity.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor 5:1. "Father's wife" may have been referring to either his mother or his stepmother. In either case it was deemed incestuous (Leviticus 18:7).

church body (5:6). Paul illustrates this with the metaphorical use of “yeast,” an agent that has the property of permeating an entire loaf of bread, given enough time. He exhorts them to deal with the situation immediately and to do the same with others who might be greedy, idolaters, slanderers, drunkards, or swindlers (5:11).

Then Paul addresses the issue of lawsuits between believers which were also causing disorder within this church (1 Cor 6:1-11). Paul now points out the impropriety of believers, who are to wisely judge the world, taking their issues to a judge who is unrighteous and without godly wisdom. Believers should not have to go to secular courts to resolve their issues. Instead, they are to look to those within the church to judge such matters (6:5). This condition, one believer having a legal issue with another, reveals again the lack of love they had toward each other.

While it may appear that Paul has switched to an entirely new subject, there is a bridging verse that connects the issue of lawsuits with the sexual immorality issues (6:12-20). Corinthian believers were instructed to deal with legal issues internally because they had been washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of Jesus and by the Spirit (6:11). This made them more able to judge such matters, and it also compels them to see their bodies as members of Christ himself (6:15), as well as temples of the Holy Spirit (6:19). Therefore, they were to abstain from all kinds of sexual immorality and to honor God with the proper use of their human bodies.

*Topic #3: The problem of Christian life and church issues (1 Cor 7--15).* Paul now turns his attention to a list of issues given to him in writing from some of those in the Corinthian church. The topics Paul now addresses are marriage, food offered to idols, worship, and the resurrection of believers (1 Cor 7—15; 2 Cor 5).

The Corinthian believers must have had questions about the need and necessity of marriage (1 Cor 7). Paul states that ideally it is better to remain single so that believers can

devote themselves to the Lord's affairs (7:32), but he is careful to point out that singleness is to be only for those gifted from God to do so, and not for those who face such great immorality and "burn with passion" (7:2, 7).

While Paul now turns to the question of whether or not it is acceptable to eat food offered to idols (1 Cor 8--10), he skillfully deals with the underlying principle that even though a believer has liberty in Jesus he is not to take this as license to do whatever he pleases, especially when it offends other believers (8:7-13). Paul, as an apostle, points to his own freedom in Jesus and states that he is a slave to everyone so that he may win as many as possible (9:19). Again Paul brings the specific issue at hand, food offered to idols, to be viewed under the need for love first in all church matters.

The issue of proper worship must have been paramount in Paul's mind since he devoted almost one-third (27%) of this epistle to the subject of proper worship, including such aspects as headship, the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts (especially the gift of tongues) and the supremacy of love (1 Cor 11-14).

After dealing with the headship of God over Jesus, Jesus over a man, and a man over a woman, (11:3-16) he then turns his attention to the Lord's Supper (11:17-34). Instead of the ordinance being a visible representation of the Good News of the death of Jesus for our sins, it had become a kind of feast sometimes ending in drunkenness (11:20-21).

Using the analogy of a human body, Paul next makes it clear that God has given each believer a special gift, a manifestation of the Spirit, for the common good, or the "bringing together" (συνφέρω, *sumphero*) so that the body of believers might be built up (12:1-31). The analogy of the body illustrates how there are many different parts but all work together synergistically, with Jesus at its head, for the purpose of strengthening and encouraging believers

in their spiritual growth. The theme of headship has been carried over from headship in worship (11:3) to Jesus' headship of the church.

Paul again raises the priority of love (*ἀγάπη*, *agape*) over every aspect of the Christian life, including speaking in tongues, faith, and hope. No other portion of scripture explains so fully the importance of love as the primary motive when relating to other believers and even non-believers (13:1-13).

One particular gift, speaking in tongues was apparently being abused and causing confusion during corporate worship. Paul places boundaries on its use, on its order, and on the interpretation of its message (14:1-39).

The final issue that Paul addresses is that of resurrection (1 Cor 15; 2 Cor 5). He reviews the Good News that because of the resurrection of Jesus, all believers will be resurrected in like manner, and will receive a glorified body (15:35-55). No other passage gives more insight into the question of what happens to the believer after death. This encouragement is to be the reason for laboring in the Lord (15:58).

*Topic #4: The problem of opposition to Paul's authority and ministry (2 Cor 1—13).*

In 2 Corinthians, which was probably Paul's fourth letter to the church at Corinth, we find an insightful autobiographical sketch of Paul's life. As a follow-up to 1 Corinthians, he now defends his travels, his ministry, the collection for the church in Jerusalem, and his authority. The theme in this letter appears to be that a New Covenant ministry will involve suffering affliction and ministering comfort (2 Cor 1:3-11).

First, Paul defends his actions (2 Cor 1:1—2:11). He explains that while those who minister in the Lord will face troubles they have purpose (1:3-11). Troubles produce reliance on

God rather than on one's own strength (1:9). Comfort during these times will come from God, and in like manner we, who go through difficult times, are to comfort others.

Secondly, Paul defends his ministry (2 Cor 2:12—7:16). Probably in defense of those who opposed him, Paul defends his ministry and his travel itinerary, including the reasons for not coming to Corinth as previously planned (1:12—7:16). He emphasizes the glory of the New Covenant (3:7-18), the treasure in each believer (4:6-7), and the relative insignificance of present troubles when compared to the eternal glory that awaits us (4:16-17).

Thirdly, Paul defends his collection (2 Cor 8:1—9:15). To encourage the Corinthian believers to give a generous offering to the poor believers in Jerusalem, he describes how the churches in Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea) had given so much. He does not state how much each is to give but to let each person decide in his heart what to give as long as it is done in the spirit of cheerfulness (9:6-8).

Finally, Paul defends his authority (1 Cor 9; 2 Cor 10:1—13:14). Paul culminates this epistle with a defense of his authority (10:8) and an exhortation to oppose false teaching (10:3—11:15). As he did previously (1 Cor 9), Paul again shows how Jesus called him to be an Apostle with a life was filled with suffering (11:16—12:10) but that kind of a life gave him a greater compassion for the Corinthian believers (12:11-21).

### Themes

The central theme running through 1 Corinthians appears to be the importance of unity within the church body. This is seen in expressions such as the “church of God in Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2), the “uniting of one's self with the Lord” (1 Cor 6:17), and as one “body” (1 Cor 10:17; 12:12-31). Explicitly and implicitly Paul emphasizes that love is far greater than self-sufficient knowledge and all other acts of the believer (1 Cor 13).

In 2 Corinthians, Paul's theme appears to be that a New Covenant ministry will involve both suffering affliction and ministering comfort (2 Cor 1:3-11). He illustrates this in his own apostolic experience. Using the inner man/outer man metaphor he shows why suffering is temporal compared to the pending glory of the inner man (2 Cor 4:16-17). He also stresses the need to oppose false teachings and arguments that oppose the knowledge of God (2 Cor 10:5) as part of the New Covenant ministry.

### Conclusion

At first, Paul's epistles to the Corinthians may appear to be a collection of random issues regarding the Corinthian church. However, careful examination reveals a masterful continuity of thought on the author's part. Such issues of disunity, disorder, and immaturity were no doubt the result of a church which was very young spiritually, and therefore, subject to the influences of its surrounding culture and the insidious teaching of the apostate. This church put the priority of self-indulgence and superficial knowledge above the primacy of humility and love. Almost every issue Paul addresses would have been quickly absolved if a Christ-like love attitude was being practiced among the members. As part of this expression of love, Paul includes the need to find comfort from God, and from each other, especially when faced with the suffering that comes from living and spreading the New Covenant.

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