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Lesson 1

Background

It is no exaggeration to say that ancient Corinth was similar to today's large American cities. It was a busy, cosmopolitan, commercial center known by all. The first Christian church of Corinth had an equally strong likeness to many urban churches of today. As you study this lesson try to *visualize* the setting of Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. In doing so you will find it easy and natural to apply its teachings to the twentieth century. Assuredly the letter was written not only for a local congregation of one generation but for Christians everywhere throughout the entire Christian age.

I. CORINTH: THE CITY AND ITS PEOPLE

When Paul visited Corinth for the first time in A.D. 50, he must have been impressed by its stately buildings and bustling commerce. This Greek city was widely acclaimed as the hub of the Roman Empire's commerce, a strategic position that Paul no doubt coveted for the advantage of propagating the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The following descriptions will help you appreciate what Paul saw, learned, and experienced concerning the city and its people.

A. Name

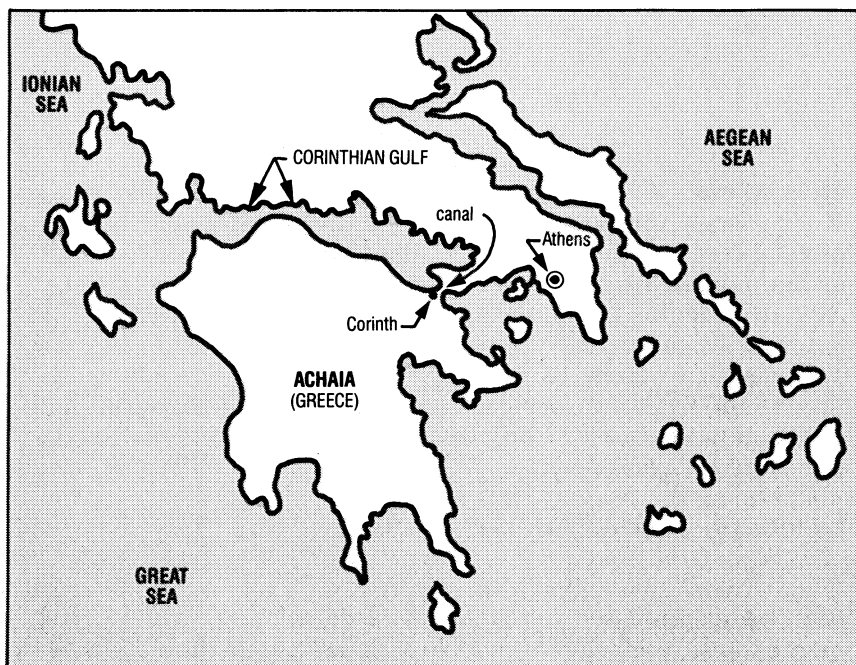
The Greek name *Korintos* means "ornament."

B. Geography

Observe on the map the strategic location of Corinth on the four-mile-wide isthmus between the Ionian and Aegean seas. Shippers

moving cargo between Italy and Asia Minor via Corinth avoided the dangerous voyage around the southern tip of Greece. Small ships were moved across the isthmus by tramway, or cargo of the larger ships was transferred to transports waiting at the eastern port.¹

GEOGRAPHY OF CORINTH, SHOWING CORINTHIAN GULF AND CANAL



C. History

Corinth's ancient history revolves around two events: (1) the destruction of the old city by the Roman general Mummius, 146 B.C., and (2) the rebuilding of the city by Julius Caesar, with its gaining status as a Roman colony, 46 B.C. How old, then, was the new city when Paul first visited it?

1. For an excellent description of the sights that Paul probably saw on his first visit to Corinth, consult Charles F. Pfeiffer and Howard F. Vos, *The Wycliffe Historical Geography of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody, 1967), pp. 477-87.

D. Population

Estimates of size in Paul's day vary from 100,000 to 700,000. There was a mixture of races (Roman, Greek, oriental) and a large distribution of mobile-type occupations (e.g., sailors and businessmen). A large proportion of its population was composed of slaves.

E. Political Status

Corinth was a Roman colony, the capital of the province of Achaia. Gallio was proconsul ("deputy," KJV*) of the province during Paul's visit (Acts 18:12).

F. Moral Condition

The depraved character of the old city of Corinth, exemplified by prostitute priestesses serving in the temple of Aphrodite,² goddess of beauty and love, was carried over into the new city of New Testament times. The very word *Korinthiazomai* ("to act the Corinthian") came to mean "to commit fornication." One writer has described Corinth as "a seaman's paradise, a drunkard's heaven, and a virtuous woman's hell."³

G. Activities

1. *Commerce.* Movement of shipping across the isthmus was Corinth's number one business. Some of its own manufactured products included items of pottery and brass.

2. *Education.* Study of arts and science flourished. There were studios of language and schools of philosophy. Yet Paul, raised in the environment of the university of Tarsus, and trained under the great teacher Gamaliel, was keen to detect an intellectualism that was both smug and superficial. (Read some of Paul's references to knowledge and wisdom in such passages as 1:20-21, 27; 2:1-8.)

3. *Sports.* Corinth was a famous sports center, hosting the Isthmian Games (similar in some ways to the Olympics) held every two years. It is interesting to observe that corruption in sports

*King James Version.

2. This Greek goddess was identified with the Roman goddess Venus.

3. Joseph M. Gettys, *How to Study I Corinthians* (Richmond: John Knox, 1951), p. 10.

events was widespread at this time.⁴ (Read Paul's references to sports in 9:24-27.)

4. *Religion.* Corinth was a city of many gods and various cults. Judaism was one of its oriental religions. The Jews' synagogue was Paul's favorite place of contact for reaching people with the gospel when he first arrived in Corinth (Acts 18:1-4).

II. THE ARRIVAL OF PAUL THE EVANGELIST-TEACHER

Read Acts 18:1-18a for the historical record of Paul's first evangelistic ministry in Corinth. This visit took place on the apostle's second missionary journey about A.D. 50. Answer the following questions on the basis of the Bible text.

1. Does the text indicate when Aquila and Priscilla were converted to Christ? Read these other New Testament references to this couple, and try to decide when they may have become believers (if they were not already believers when Paul first met them, Acts 18:2). Acts 18:18b, 26; Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19.

2. What different verbs of the Acts passage are used to describe Paul's *word* ministry (e.g., "reasoned," v. 4)?

3. To what different groups did Paul minister?

4. What were the different reactions to Paul's message?

How many conversions were there?

5. Account for Paul's action of verse 6.

4. Pfeiffer and Vos, p. 485.

6. What does this passage teach about revelation and divine help?

7. What do you think constituted Paul's "teaching the word of God" (18:11)?

8. What is suggested by the words "And Paul . . . tarried there yet a good while" (18:18a)?

9. One of the important things Paul did while in Corinth was to write the two epistles to the Thessalonians.⁵ Read 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2 for references to Paul's ministry at Corinth at this time. (Cf. 1 Thess. 2:15.)

III. THE FIRST CHURCH OF CORINTH

Our analytical study of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians will reveal much about the spiritual condition of this church, so that need not be mentioned here. Other observations include the following:

1. The organized church began around A.D. 50 as a small nucleus of believers, most of whom were Gentiles (e.g., Justus, Acts 18:7), and some of whom were Jews (e.g., Crispus, Acts 18:8). Their meeting place from the start may have been an upper chamber of the house of one of the group, such as Crispus.

2. Most of the members were probably of the poorer or middle-class strata (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26ff., which only suggests this observation).

3. The church members were slow to mature in their Christian faith and conduct (cf. 3:1ff.). This was part of the heavy burden borne by Paul, which he referred to as "the care of all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28).

5. There was probably an interim of a few months between the writings of the two epistles.

4. Apollos was the church's pastor-teacher for part of the time between Paul's second and third missionary journeys. (Read Acts 18:24–19:1. Also read the seven references to Apollos in 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4–6, 22; 4:6; 16:12. The last reference concerns a proposed second tour of duty by Apollos in Corinth.)

5. First Corinthians 1:12 and 9:5 only suggest the *possibility* that Peter may have ministered to the church at Corinth.

IV. CONTACTS AFTER THE FIRST VISIT AND BEFORE THE FIRST EPISTLE

Two possible contacts that Paul had with the Corinthian converts after his first visit and before writing 1 Corinthians were these.⁶

1. A short visit to combat an incipient opposition to the apostle's ministry and to correct other evils. Apparently his mission was not effective.⁷ (Read 2 Cor. 2:1; 12:14; 13:1–2. Note the reference to a forthcoming "third time" visit.)

2. A letter referred to in 1 Corinthians 5:9. At least part of the letter was written to correct existing evils in the church. The letter is not part of the New Testament canon and was therefore not divinely inspired Scripture.⁸

V. THE FIRST INSPIRED EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS

This is the book on which we will focus our attention for the remainder of this study manual.

A. Time and Place Written

Paul wrote this letter on his third missionary journey, toward the end of his three-year ministry in the city of Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:8)⁹

6. Different views are held on this obscure subject, because of the relative silence of the New Testament. You may want to consult various authors for a full discussion. Concerning your study of the inspired epistles to the Corinthians, rest confidently in the principle that one's study of what God has chosen to reveal is not jeopardized by His *silence* concerning any subject.

7. This unrecorded visit is placed before 1 Corinthians by A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), pp. xxi–xxv, and by Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1958), 2:52–54. The visit is placed *after* 1 Corinthians by Merrill Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 298, and by S. Lewis Johnson, "First Corinthians," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1228.

8. Paul obviously wrote many letters in his lifetime besides those that were inspired.

9. See Acts 20:31; cf. 19:8, 10 for the time element.

The year of writing was A.D. 55. Read Acts 19:1-20 for a description of the fruitful work he was doing at Ephesus in the power of God, while *in absentia* he was trying to help the Corinthian church with its problems.

B. Occasion

Paul was a traveling evangelist who took to heart the follow-up work of nurturing the young converts he had led to Christ. As noted earlier, he called this burden “the care of all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28). Paul learned of the Corinthians’ problems through reports (see 1: 11 and 5:1) and inquiries (7:1, 25; 8:1; 11:2; 12:1; 15:1; 16:1) originating with members and leaders of the church (cf. 1 Cor. 16:17.) If he had already made a short visit since founding the church, he knew of some of the problems firsthand as well.

C. Purposes

Among Paul’s purposes in writing were these: (1) to identify the basic problems underlying the reports and inquiries, (2) to offer solutions by way of doctrine and example, (3) to give extended teaching on related doctrines, (4) to give at least a short defense of his apostleship, and (5) to exhort the believers in the ways of a full, mature Christian life. More will be said about these purposes in Lesson 2 (survey). How do they suggest the title, assigned by one writer, “The Epistle of Sanctification”?

D. Authenticity

First Corinthians is one of the best-attested epistles as to authorship and unity of content.

E. Relation to the Other New Testament Books

The location of the Corinthian letters in the New Testament canon is a natural one when one considers *general emphases*.¹⁰ This is shown in the following diagram:

10. This observation holds only in the large overall sense. For example, there is much interpretation in the gospels and Acts, just as there is much application in Romans and much interpretation in the Corinthian letters.

THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

NEW TESTAMENT ORDER	EMPHASES
GOSPELS ACTS	HISTORICAL FACTS
ROMANS	INTERPRETATIONS
1 and 2 CORINTHIANS	APPLICATIONS

Chart A shows all twenty-seven books of the New Testament grouped according to topic. Note that the Corinthian letters are classified under the heading *Ecclesiology* (doctrine of the church). Second Corinthians (Paul's Ministry Vindicated) is more personal than 1 Corinthians, just as 2 Timothy (Paul's Ministry Accomplished) is more personal than 1 Timothy.

VI. APPLYING 1 CORINTHIANS TO TODAY

It is not difficult to apply 1 Corinthians to our own lives, because it is such a practical epistle throughout. G. Campbell Morgan's appeal concerning a study of the book is appropriate:

Think of it . . . not merely as addressed to a city of long ago, today lost comparatively and in ruins, with all its splendor gone, but as addressed to a church there, and to all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. THIS LETTER IS TO US.¹¹

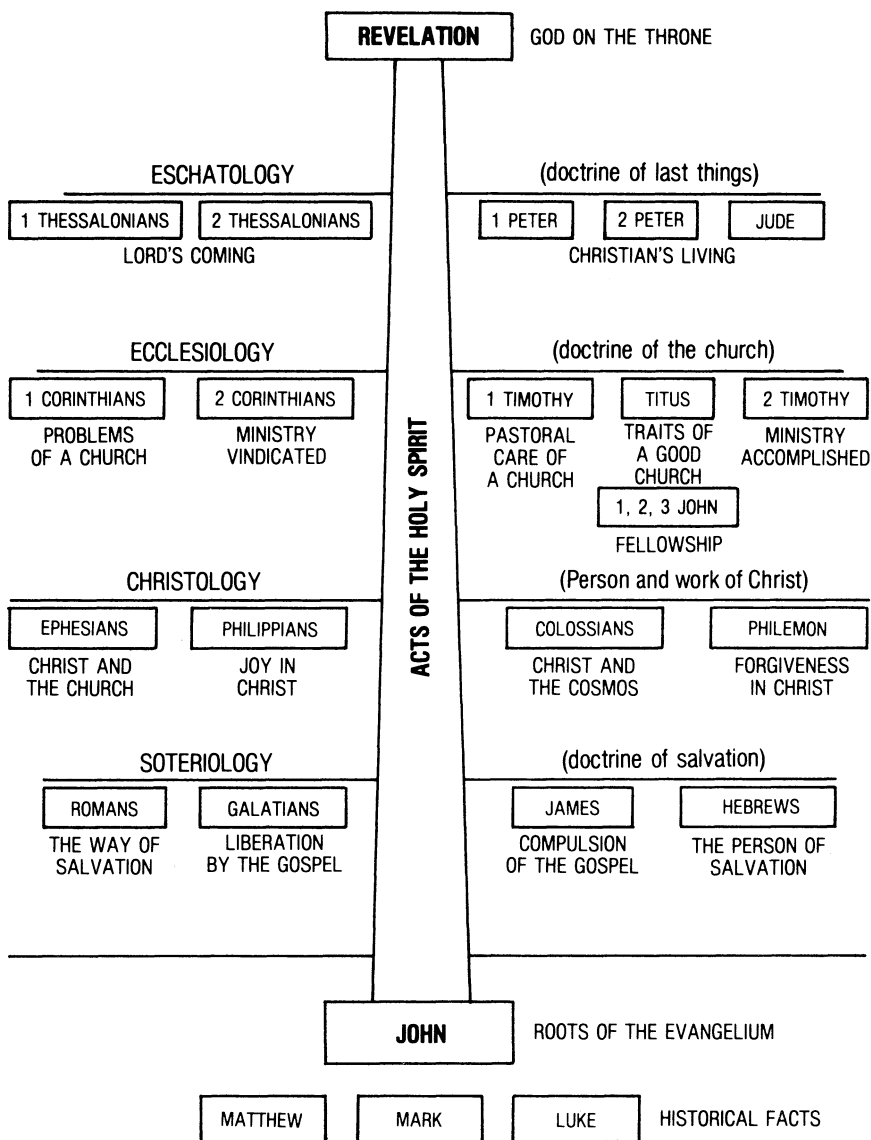
The few questions given below emphasize this practical application.

1. In what ways was Corinth of Paul's day like many cities today?

2. On the basis of what you know about Corinth, relate the following two statements to each other: (1) a classic New Testament passage on the doctrine of sin is found in Romans (1:18–3:20); (2) Paul wrote Romans from Corinth.¹²

11. G. Campbell Morgan, *The Corinthian Letters of Paul*, p. 10. Emphasis supplied.

12. On his third missionary journey.



3. How do you account for the successes of Paul's ministry in Corinth on his first visit there?

Consider the following comments of one writer.

The conditions which Paul and the Christian gospel faced in Corinth should give pause to the modern preacher who laments the moral corruption of his own day and feels that his task is almost impossible in such a context. Conditions in Corinth were far worse. The message and power of the gospel are the same in the twentieth century as they were in the first.¹³

4. What do you think contributes to spiritual problems in the early months and years of a born-again believer? Why do spiritual problems often arise very early in the life of a newly organized local church? (Answering these questions is a good introduction to the next lesson, where various problems will be viewed, at least in a general way.)

13. Pfeiffer and Vos, p. 481.