

Commentaries on Corinth and the Epistle of 1 Corinthians

Expanded Bible Comments:

Written about 3 years after the Apostle Paul left Corinth. R3144:3

The church at Corinth had been founded for nearly five years and had enjoyed a wide range of experiences and divine providences. R4442:1

The church at Corinth was split into factions, divisions (literally, sects); some were Paulites, others Apollosites, others Peterites, and others Christians. Since the majority were Paulites, and since Paul had founded the church at Corinth, it might appear to some that he had been seeking to make converts to himself, Paulites instead of Christians; and as it turned out thus he was glad to have it to say, that very few of those calling themselves Paulites had been baptized by him. R1540:5 The first epistle of the Corinthians was mainly to correct sectarianism among those at Corinth, and to answer the erroneous teachings of some, that there would be no resurrection of the dead. What a valuable fund of blessing and knowledge came to the Church down the ages in connection with the answer and refutation of these errors. R868:3

Corinth was nicknamed the Vanity Fair of the world, because it was a center of frivolity, pleasure-seeking, etc. It is credited with having been one of the most licentious and profligate cities of its day. It may at first seem very strange to us that this vilest of the great cities should yield larger spiritual results than any other, so that the Lord would specially specify that he had "much people" there and would providentially detain his ambassador there a year and a half, while in other places he had been permitted to remain only a few days or a few weeks. The philosophy of the matter seems to be this: Outward morality frequently leads to a pharisaical spirit of self-righteousness, which is most pernicious and a deadly foe to true righteousness. On the other hand, where sin stands out glaringly, it has a repulsive effect upon the pure heart, upon all who love righteousness, and this repulsion seems to prepare such hearts the better for a genuine consecration to the Lord and for his message. This theory holds good, at least in the missionary work at Corinth, as in contrast with that of places much more respectable in reputation. R4417:1

This once voluptuous city of Greece was 40 miles west of Athens, on the isthmus of Corinth. It has two seaports. On its south rises the rocky mountain, Acrocorinthus, whose summit was crowned with a Temple of Venus. It once had an extensive commerce, but was noted for its licentiousness, and the name "Corinthian" applied to a woman was notorious. Paul preached there a year and a half (Act 18:11), and evidently paid it a second visit (1Co 16:7; Act 20:2-3). He wrote two letters to the Christians in that city, rebuking their sins, and referring to the Isthmian games celebrated there every Olympiad.

Expositor's Bible:

In the year 58 A.D., when Paul wrote this Epistle, Corinth was a city with a mixed population, and conspicuous for the turbulence and immorality commonly found in seaports frequented by traders and seamen from all parts of the world. Paul had received letters from some of the Christians in Corinth which disclosed a state of matters in the Church far from desirable. He had also more particular accounts from some members of Chloe's household who were visiting Ephesus, and who told him how sadly disturbed the little community of Christians was by party spirit and scandals in life and worship.

Smith's Bible Dictionary:

The First Epistle to the Corinthians was written by the apostle Paul toward the close of his nearly three years stay at Ephesus, Act 19:10; Act 20:31, which, we learn from 1Co 16:8, probably terminated with the **Pentecost** of A.D. 57 or 58. The bearers were probably (according to the common subscription) Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus. It appears to have been called forth by the information the apostles had received of dissension in the Corinthian church, which may be thus explained: —

The Corinthian church was planted by the apostle himself, 1Co 3:6, in his second missionary journey. Act 18:1. Seq. He abode in the city a year and a half. Act 18:11.

A short time after the apostle had left the city, the eloquent Jew of Alexandria, Apollos, went to Corinth, Act 19:1, and gained many followers, dividing the church into two parties, the followers of Paul and the followers of Apollos.

Later on, Judaizing teachers from Jerusalem preached the gospel in a spirit of direct antagonism to St. Paul *personally*. To this third party, we may perhaps add a fourth, that, under the name of "the followers of **Christ**," 1Co 2:12, sought, at first, to separate themselves from the factious adherence to particular teachers, but eventually were driven. By antagonism. Into positions equally sectarian and inimical to the unity of the church.

At this momentous period, before parties had become consolidated and they had distinctly withdrawn from communion with one another, the apostle writes; and in the outset of the Epistle, 1 Corinthians 1:1-4:21, we have this noble and impassioned protest against this fourfold rending of the robe of **Christ**.

Easton's Bible Dictionary:

1 Corinthians was written from Ephesus (1Co 16:8) about the time of the Passover in the third year of the apostle's sojourn there (Act 19:10; Act 20:31), and when he had formed the purpose to visit Macedonia, and then return to Corinth (probably A.D. 57).

The news which had reached him, however, from Corinth frustrated his plan. He had heard of the abuses and contentions that had arisen among them, first from Apollos (Act 19:1), and then from a letter they had written him on the subject, and also from some of the "household of Chloe," and from Stephanas and his two friends who had visited him (1Co 1:11; 1Co 16:17). Paul thereupon wrote this letter, for the purpose of checking the factious spirit and correcting the erroneous opinions that had sprung up among them, and remedying the many abuses and disorderly practices that prevailed. Titus and a brother whose name is not given were probably the bearers of the letter (2Co 2:13; 2Co 8:6, 2Co 8:16-18).

The epistle may be divided into four parts:

- (1.) The apostle deals with the subject of the lamentable divisions and party strifes that had arisen among them (1 Cor. 1-4).
- (2.) He next treats of certain cases of immorality that had become notorious among them. They had apparently set at nought the very first principles of morality (1Co 5:1-13; 6).
- (3.) In the third part he discusses various questions of doctrine and of Christian ethics in reply to certain communications they had made to him. He especially rectifies certain flagrant abuses regarding the celebration of the Lord's supper (1 Cor. 7-14).
- (4.) The concluding part (1 Cor. 15; 16) contains an elaborate defense of the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, which had been called in question by some among them, followed by some general instructions, intimations, and greetings.

This epistle “shows the powerful self-control of the apostle in spite of his physical weakness, his distressed circumstances, his incessant troubles, and his emotional nature. It was written, he tells us, in bitter anguish, 'out of much affliction and pressure of heart... and with streaming eyes' (2Co_2:4); yet he restrained the expression of his feelings, and wrote with a dignity and holy calm which he thought most calculated to win back his erring children. It gives a vivid picture of the early church... It entirely dissipates the dream that the apostolic church was in an exceptional condition of holiness of life or purity of doctrine.” The apostle in this epistle unfolds and applies great principles fitted to guide the church of all ages in dealing with the same and kindred evils in whatever form they may appear.

This is one of the epistles the authenticity of which has never been called in question by critics of any school, so many and so conclusive are the evidences of its Pauline origin.

The subscription to this epistle states erroneously in the Authorized Version that it was written at Philippi. This error arose from a mistranslation of 1Co_16:5, “For I do pass through Macedonia,” which was interpreted as meaning, “I am passing through Macedonia.” In 1Co_16:8 he declares his intention of remaining some time longer in Ephesus. After that, his purpose is to “pass through Macedonia.”

Fausset's Bible Dictionary:

CORINTH. Famed for its commerce, chiefly due to its situation between the Ionian and Aegean seas, on the isthmus connecting the Peloponnese with Greece. In Paul's time it was capital of Achaia, and seat of the Roman proconsul (Act_18:12). Its people had the Greek love of philosophical subtleties. The immorality was notorious even in the pagan world; so that "to Corinthianize" was proverbial for playing the wanton. The worship of Venus, whose temple was on Acrocorinthus, was attended with shameless profligacy, 1,000 female slaves being maintained for the service of strangers. Hence, arose dangers to the purity of the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 5-7), founded by Paul on his first visit in his second missionary journey (Act_18:1-17). The early Greek Corinth had been left desolate for 100 years; its merchants had withdrawn to Delos, and the presidency of the isthmian games had been transferred to Sicyon, when Julius Caesar refounded the city as a Roman colony.

Gallio the philosopher, Seneca's brother, was proconsul during Paul's first residence, in Claudius' reign. Paul had come from Athens, shortly afterward Silas and Timothy from Macedonia joined him. His two earliest epistles, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, were written there, A.D. 52 or 53. Here he made the friendship of Aquila and Priscilla, and labored at tentmaking with the former. Here, after his departure, Apollos came from Ephesus. The number of Latin names in Paul's epistle to the Romans, written during his second visit of three months at Corinth (Act_20:3), A.D. 58, is in undesigned harmony with the origin of many of its people as a Roman colony. At the time of Paul's visit Claudius' decree banishing the Jews from Rome caused an influx of them to Corinth. Hence, many Jewish converts were in the Corinthian church (Acts 18), and a Judaizing spirit arose.

FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS. Paul had been instrumental in converting many Gentiles (1Co_12:2) and some Jews (Act_18:8), notwithstanding the Jews' opposition (Act_18:5-6), during his one year and a half sojourn in Corinth. The converts were mostly of the humbler classes (1Co_1:26). Crispus, Erastus, and Gaius (Caius), however, were men of rank (1Co_1:14; Act_18:8; Rom_16:23). 1Co_11:22 implies a variety of classes. The immoralities abounding outside at Corinth, and the craving even within the church for Greek philosophy and rhetoric which Apollos' eloquent style gratified, rather than for the simple preaching of Christ crucified (1Co_2:1, etc.; Act_18:24, etc.), as also the opposition of Judaizing teachers who boasted of having "letters of commendation" from Jerusalem the metropolis of the faith, caused the apostle anxiety.

The Judaizers depreciated his apostolic authority (1Co 9:1-2; 2Co 10:1; 2Co 10:7-8), professing, some to be the followers of the chief apostle, Cephas; others to belong to Christ Himself, rejecting all subordinate teaching (1Co 1:12; 2Co 10:7). Some gave themselves out to be apostles (2Co 11:5; 2Co 11:13), alleging that Paul was not of the twelve nor an eye-witness of the gospel facts, and did not dare to prove his apostleship by claiming support from the church (1 Corinthians 9). Even those who declared themselves Paul's followers did so in a party spirit, glorying in the minister instead of in Christ. Apollos' followers also rested too much on his Alexandrian rhetoric, to the disparagement of Paul, who studied simplicity lest aught should interpose between the Corinthians and the Spirit's demonstration of the Savior (1 Corinthians 2).

Epicurean self-indulgence led some to deny the resurrection (1Co 15:32). Hence, they connived at the incest of one of them with his stepmother (1 Corinthians 5). The elders of the church had written to consult Paul on minor points: (1) meats offered to idols; (2) celibacy and marriage; (3) the proper use of spiritual gifts in public worship; (4) the collection for the saints at Jerusalem (1Co 16:1, etc.). But they never told him about the serious evils, which came to his ears only through some of the household of Chloe (1Co 1:11), contentions, divisions, lawsuits brought before pagan courts by Christian brethren against brethren (1Co 6:1). Moreover, some abused spiritual gifts to display and fanaticism (1 Corinthians 14); simultaneous ministrations interrupted the seemly order of public worship; women spoke unveiled, in violation of eastern usage, and usurped the office of men; even the Holy Communion was desecrated by reveling (1 Corinthians 11).

These then formed topics of his epistle, and occasioned his sending Timothy to them after his journey to Macedonia (1Co 4:17). In 1Co 4:18; 1Co 5:9, he implies that he had sent a previous letter to them; probably enjoining also a contribution for the poor saints at Jerusalem. Upon their asking directions as to the mode, he now replies (1Co 16:2). In it he also announced his design of visiting them on his way to and from Macedonia (2Co 1:15-16), which design he changed on hearing the unfavorable report from Chloe's household (1Co 16:5-7), for which he was charged with fickleness (2Co 1:15-17).

Before this former letter, he paid a second visit (probably during his three years' sojourn at Ephesus, from which he could pass readily by sea to Corinth Act 19:10; Act 20:31); for in 2Co 12:14; 2Co 13:1, he declares his intention to pay a third visit. In 1Co 13:2 translated "I have already said (at my second visit), and declare now beforehand, as (I did) when I was present the second time, so also (I declare) now in my absence to them who have heretofore sinned (namely, before my second visit, 1Co 12:21) and to all others" (who have sinned since it, or are in danger of sinning).

The second visit was a painful one, owing to the misconduct of many of his converts (2Co 2:1). Then followed his letter before 1 Corinthians, charging them "not to company with fornicators." In 1Co 5:9-12 he corrects their misapprehensions of that injunction. The Acts omits that second visit, as it omits other incidents of Paul's life, e.g. his visit to Arabia (Gal 1:17-28). The place of writing was Ephesus (1Co 16:8). The subscription "from Philippi" arose from mistranslating 1Co 16:5, "I am passing through Macedonia;" he intended (1Co 16:8) leaving Ephesus after Pentecost that year. He left it about A.D. 57 (Act 19:21). The Passover imagery makes it likely the date was springtime (1Co 5:7), A.D. 57.

Just before his conflict with the beastlike mob of Ephesus, 1Co 15:32 implies that already he had premonitory symptoms; the storm was gathering, his "adversaries many" (1Co 16:9; Rom 16:4). The tumult (Act 19:29-30) had not yet taken place, for immediately after it he left Ephesus for Macedonia. Sosthenes, the ruler of the Jews' synagogue, after being beaten, seems to have been won by Paul's love to an adversary in affliction (Act 18:12-17). Converted, like Crispus his predecessor in office, he is joined with Paul in the inscription, as "our brother." A marvelous triumph of Christian love! Paul's persecutor paid in his own coin by the Greeks, before Gallio's eyes, and then subdued to Christ by the love of him whom he sought to persecute. Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, were probably the bearers of the epistle (1Co 16:17-18); see the subscription.