

Introduction to First Corinthians

To understand this letter, we must understand the city of Corinth. Corinth was one of the most influential cities in the ancient world. In fact, the very name “Corinth” became synonymous with sexual immorality. To “Corinthianize” meant to live a life given over to moral excess. That reputation extended far beyond the city itself and became idiomatic for Gentile culture at large.

Corinth was a what a trendsetter in commerce, philosophy, entertainment, and moral permissiveness to the ancient world. This background matters because it explains why Paul writes as he does and why this letter hits us so directly today.

The Strategic Importance of Corinth

Corinth occupied an extraordinary geopolitical position. It sat on a narrow isthmus connecting northern and southern Greece. Rather than risk the dangerous voyage around the southern peninsula, ships would unload cargo at Corinth, transport it across land, and reload on the other side. Smaller vessels were even dragged across on wooden tracks known as the diolkos. This made Corinth a commercial hub of enormous wealth and influence.

Attempts were made, even by Emperor Nero, to cut a canal through the isthmus, though it was not completed until the nineteenth century. All major east-west and north-south trade routes intersected at Corinth. Its prosperity was virtually guaranteed.

Corinth was also ancient. It appears in Homer’s Iliad and was known for early naval innovation. Mythology associated the city with Jason and the Argonauts. The rebuilt Roman Corinth, however, was highly cosmopolitan, populated by Greeks, Romans, Syrians, Asians, Egyptians, Jews, and others.

Religiously, Corinth was saturated with pagan worship. The temple of Aphrodite alone employed over a thousand prostitutes. Idolatry was normal, immorality celebrated, and indulgence institutionalized. Even in the pagan world, Corinth was infamous for moral corruption.

Paul later lists sins common in Corinth, including sexual immorality, idolatry, adultery, homosexuality, theft, drunkenness, and extortion. These are not abstract categories; they describe the cultural air believers breathed daily. Corinth was, in effect, ancient Hollywood, Las Vegas, and New York rolled into one.

Paul’s Arrival in Corinth

Paul arrived in Corinth after difficult ministry experiences in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. While Athens receives much attention, Paul saw little fruit there. His eighteen months in Corinth, summarized in Acts chapter eighteen, were deeply formative.

Paul came to Corinth “in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling.” He arrived alone, since Silas and Timothy were still in Macedonia. While there, he stayed with Aquila and Priscilla, Jewish believers expelled from Rome under Emperor Claudius around A.D. 49.

They shared a trade. Paul was a tentmaker, more precisely a leatherworker. His home region was known for goat's-hair cloth used in tents. Jewish culture required fathers to teach their children a trade, regardless of education. The rabbis said that one who did not teach a trade raised a thief. Paul's vocational skill allowed him to support himself while ministering.

This introduces an important concept I call spiritual entrepreneurship. Paul refused to be financially dependent on those to whom he ministered. He accepted gifts for others, particularly the church in Jerusalem, but not for himself. He maintained independence so that the gospel would not be hindered or misunderstood.

Conflict, Letters, and Visits

Paul was eventually forced out of the synagogue and began meeting next door. This pattern is common throughout church history: those who cling to Scripture are often rejected by organized religion. Paul himself experienced this.

The Corinthian church consisted largely of Gentiles. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, believed, as did Sosthenes. Gaius hosted Paul and the church. Erastus, the city's director of public works, was also a believer, supported by archaeological evidence.

After Paul left Corinth, Apollos arrived, a gifted teacher from Alexandria who knew only the baptism of John until Aquila and Priscilla explained the way of God more accurately.

Paul wrote at least four letters to Corinth. One letter has been lost. What we call First Corinthians is actually Paul's second letter, written in response to reports of division brought by Chloe's household and a letter from the church itself. This was followed by a painful visit, then a severe letter, and finally what we call Second Corinthians, written after repentance and reconciliation.

Understanding this timeline helps make sense of Paul's tone and references.