



INTRODUCTION

Any serious study of Paul's two letters to the church of Christ in Corinth necessarily involves a good knowledge of the history of the city itself, and especially the events leading up to the establishment of the church. What appears in this introduction is not new; nor is it novel. Other commentators have plowed the same ground. Be that as it may, I would be amiss if I neglected to give my readers at least a good working knowledge of those facts that might be helpful in developing an appreciation of the impact that the Gospel of Jesus Christ had on this ancient city, the problems confronting the brethren at that time and that place, and the amazing change that came over the Corinthians as a result of Paul's labors with them. While the power of the Gospel is evident in every single New Testament case history, these two epistles manifest in a remarkable way the power of God's word to produce change in the lives of all who hear and obey that inspired message (Rom. 1:16-17). This life changing power in the Gospel can be seen in the conversion of the Corinthian brethren *out of* paganism and *into* the Kingdom of the Son of His love (Col. 1:12-13). We can also learn from the first epistle that change is sometimes slow and painful; but given the chance to grow and mature, even those problems confronting the infant church at Corinth can be overcome, as indicated in the second letter that Paul wrote to the congregation.

The City of Corinth: It seems best to begin with a description of the city itself. Corinth was a celebrated city of the Peloponnesus, a large peninsula linked to the northern territory of Greece by the Isthmus of Corinth. To the west of the Peloponnesus is the Ionian Sea and to the east is the Aegean Sea. The terrain is typified by high limestone mountains, narrow coastal plains, and natural rocky harbors. The area contained several cities important in antiquity, such as Mycenae, Argos, Megalopolis, Sparta, Elis, Messene, and Corinth. The region also contains the important ancient religious sites of Olympia, Epidaurus, Isthmia, and Nemea.

The site was occupied before 3000 B.C., but its history is obscure until the early 8th century B.C., when the city-state of Corinth began to develop as a commercial center. Prior to the 8th century the city was known as Ephyra, and the exact origin is steeped in Greek mythology rather than historical fact. Corinth's political influence was increased through territorial expansion in the vicinity, and by the late 8th century it had secured control of the Isthmus. The Corinthians established colonies at Corcyra and Syracuse, which would later assure them a dominant position in trade with the western Mediterranean.

The ancient city grew up at the base of the citadel of the Acrocorinthus - a Gibraltar-like eminence rising 1,886 feet (575 meters) above sea level. The Acrocorinthus lies about 1.5 miles (2.5 km) south of the Isthmus of Corinth, which connects the Peloponnesus with central-Greece and which also separates the Saronic and Corinthian gulfs from each other. The citadel of the Acrocorinthus rises precipitously above the old city and commands the land route into the Peloponnesus, a circumstance that gave Corinth great strategic and commercial importance in ancient times.

Numerous attempts were made to build a canal across the isthmus in ancient times; the most notable attempt being that of Nero (about 15 years after Paul established the church there), in 66 A.D. The reason for such a project seems rather obvious.

Ancient seafaring men so dreaded having to make the 200 mile voyage around the southern capes of the Peloponnesus, they would tie ropes to their ships, put logs under them and drag them across the isthmus. Large ships were unloaded, dragged across, the cargo carried across, put back on board and then they would sail on across the Mediterranean Sea (Butler, 2).

At the center of the city there was the market place, with its bronze statue of Athena and the temple of Apollo, which today is among the most prominent ruins from antiquity.

The name of Corinth was supposed to have been given to the city by Corinthus, a supposed son of Pelops, who rebuilt the city and adorned it with great wealth. In ancient days Greek battleships were built in what was later to become the city of Corinth. The city became prosperous and powerful in the 7th century B.C. "According to all ancient testimony, Corinth was the wealthiest and most important city in Greece at this time" (*Interpreters Bible*, 3).

In what is sometimes referred to as the *Classical period* of Greece, Corinth, controlled the sea trade routes connecting Greece with the Mediterranean. In the Peloponnesian War of the early 5th century B.C., several of the cities of Macedonia formed a loose alliance for the purpose of defending the region against common enemies. Corinth formed an alliance with Argos, Boeotia, Thebes, and Athens to fight Sparta in the Corinthian Wars of 395-386 B.C., which conflict the Corinthians lost. Then in 338 B.C., Philip of Macedonia defeated the Greek allied forces of Athens, Thebes and Corinth in the battle of Chaironeia. That was followed by an unstable period when the region was governed by a succession of Hellenistic kings.

In 146 B.C. the city was utterly destroyed by the Romans under the leadership of Lucius Mummius, the Roman General. So devastated was the city that it was left in heaps and remained in ruins for almost a hundred years. In 46 B.C. Julius Caesar rebuilt the city and populated it with his discharged veterans. It flourished and soon regained and even surpassed the size and opulence of its earlier history. So far as commerce was concerned, Corinth ranked among one of the most prosperous. This was due, in part, to its location on the Grecian peninsula. With that prosperity came the dangers of wealth associated with riches and luxury. The city became known for its corrupt and effeminate life style. Corinth had its reputation for carnality and evil living. The very word '*korinthiazesthai*' meant "to live like a Corinthian," which in turn meant to live with drunken and immoral debauchery. "Corinth" was a by-word for evil living.

The ideal of the Corinthian was the reckless development of the individual. The merchant who made his gain by all and every means, the man of pleasure surrendering himself to every lust, the athlete steeled to every bodily exercise and proud in his physical strength, are the true Corinthian types; in a word the man who recognized no superior and no law but his own desires (McGuigan, 1).

Religiously speaking, Corinth had her false gods, and the city was a pagan stronghold for all sorts of idolatrous practices. Like many of the other cities of ancient Greece, Corinth was filled with multiple idols to the "gods" of that day and age. Apollo, Poseidon, Aphrodite and other "deities" were worshipped there. The inhabitants were especially devoted to Aphrodite, the "goddess of love, beauty, pleasure, and procreation." One author observed:

In the old city, 1000 temple prostitutions were in service of the temple. One worshipped by having relations with one of the prostitutes in the temple" (Reese, 13).

Corinth was also known for the Isthmian games which attracted much attention. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, the apostle referred to these "games." Contests like the Olympian, Pythian and Nemean, were national festivals. Only freedmen could participate in these games. Rigorous exercises were required prior to entry into the games in order to qualify to appear before the assembled throngs. Much like our Summer and Winter Olympics, the name and country of each participant was announced ahead of the start of the games, and the contestant was crowned with a garland of pine leaves, parsley, or ivy.

The point to be emphasized right here is that Corinth represented everything that the world had to offer. It was the ancient equivalent of our Las Vegas, Nevada; a city often referred to as "sin city."

If the Gospel could gain a foothold in this city, it could succeed anywhere. Indeed, "The triumph of Christianity in such a culture as that of Corinth is one of the great miracles of faith" (Coffman, Electronic Edition). This quite naturally leads to the next point for consideration.

The Establishment of the Church in Corinth: The establishment of the church in Corinth, as in other cities of Greece and Macedonia, came as a result of that wonderful Macedonian call recorded by Luke in Acts 16:6-10. Prior to his arrival into Corinth, Paul had established congregations in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens (Acts 17). The record of the beginning of the church is provided by Luke in Acts 18:1-18. Paul had just left Athens and traveled to Corinth where he would later meet Silas and Timothy (Acts 17:15). These two companions had stayed at Berea when Paul left there. It was in Corinth that Paul met Aquila and Priscilla, fellow Jews and of like occupation as well (Acts 18:2-3). Although there was some of Jewish background in Corinth, it is significant that many of the converts in Corinth were of pagan background. This makes the establishment of the church in Corinth all that more impressive.

On a side note, there are two events of importance that help us establish some kind of time frame of Paul's labors in Corinth. Luke tells us that Priscilla and Aquila came to Corinth "because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome" (Acts 18:2). The most probable date for this event, based on secular

sources, is 49 A.D. We also learn from Acts 18:12 that “when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment-seat.” This would have been Lucius Junius Annaeus Gallio, “who was a brother of Seneca, the famous philosopher and a tutor of Nero” (*Interpreters Bible*, 4). This is significant for the following reason:

An inscription has been found at Delphi which dates his [Gallio, TW] proconsulship within very narrow limits. Deissmann calculated that Gallio came to office on July 1, A.D. 51. Some students of ancient history hold that the date implied by the inscription is a year later (*Interpreter's Bible*, 4).

These two historical events strongly suggest that Paul arrived into Corinth around 50 A.D. and departed approximately in the fall of 51 A.D. Paul remained in Corinth for eighteen months (Acts 18:11) before sailing for Syria. It is believed that Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians while at Corinth. The information that Luke provides us in Acts 18 is also important in that it provides us with a means of dating various books of the New Testament. Raymond Kelcy picked up on this:

Sources outside of the Bible reveal that the edict of Claudius was in A.D. 50. Luke says that Gallio was proconsul of Achaia when Paul was in Corinth (Acts 18:12). An inscription found at Delphi enables us to date Gallio's entrance into office at about A.D. 51. Paul left Corinth after Gallio's arrival but not immediately after. It can therefore be said with certainty that Paul's stay of eighteen months in Corinth was in the early fifties. Some place the time of his departure at A.D. 52, others at 53 (Kelcy, 7).

Date and Occasion: The best scenario regarding the dating of 1 and 2 Corinthians seems to be something along the following. Paul established the church in Corinth as recorded in Acts 18:1-18 while on his second missionary journey. Shortly after leaving the city and going to Ephesus (Acts 19:1-4), he evidently wrote a letter to the congregation, which was somehow lost (see 1 Cor. 5:9). Paul then left Ephesus, leaving Aquila and Priscilla there, and returned to Antioch (Acts 18:18-22). On his third missionary journey he returned to Ephesus where he labored for a period of some two or three years. Since Corinth was only about eight days journey from Ephesus, the brethren at Corinth wrote a letter to Paul in which they asked him several questions regarding their newfound faith and certain issues troubling the brethren. At about the same time Paul received the news about the problems in Corinth from the “household of Chloe” (1 Cor. 1:11). Paul immediately sent Timothy to Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17), and then penned what we now refer to as 1 Corinthians, from the city of Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:8), informing them that he would remain in Ephesus a while longer. Having later met Titus in Troas, and upon learning that the Corinthians had responded favorably to his first letter, Paul then wrote 2 Corinthians. The most conservative dates for these two letters are between 51 and 57 A.D. and most likely toward the later.

Authorship: There is little doubt among commentators that both letters to the church at Corinth were written by the apostle Paul. “No portion of the New Testament stands with firmer credentials” (Jackson, iv). The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia notes that this letter, along with Romans and Galatians, “preserve to the church an impregnable defense of historical Christianity” (ISBE, Electronic Edition). Both the external and internal evidences point conclusively to Paul as the author. Internally, the style and vocabulary are uniquely that of Paul the apostle. Both of these letters *breath* the Pauline authorship. One of the strongest external evidences has to do with the writings of Clement of Rome. In 95 A.D. he wrote a letter to the Corinthians in which he quoted from 1 Corinthians and attributed the quote to the apostle Paul. There may be a few critics who question the Pauline authorship, but their voices are few and far between.

The Church At Corinth: Even a casual perusal of the first letter to the church at Corinth depicts a troubled congregation; one that was in a most distressing situation. The church had divided into factions and was disturbed by party alliances. In addition, the congregation was openly immoral, and others were dragging their brethren before heathen courts. There were worship problems, problems surrounding the misuse and abuse of the spiritual gifts, problems with the public worship, and more. In addition, brethren were doubting the bodily resurrection, and by implication, the very resurrection of Christ Himself. Paul wrote the first epistle to the Corinthians in an attempt to stem the tide of error and ungodliness that had infected the church in that city. Herein is one of the great values of Paul's second letter to that congregation. Even with its moral and doctrinal issues, it was not beyond repair, and when we read the second epistle we are reminded once again of the power of the living word. I will deal with issues that Paul addressed as we move through the epistle.