

# INTRODUCTION TO FIRST CORINTHIANS

## I. The city of Corinth.

- A. Location (see map): near the southern end of the narrow Isthmus, which connects the Greek peloponesus with the continent. The city had two gulfs, one on the west (Corinthian) and one on the east (Sardonic).
- B. History: due to its choice location (defensible and on trade routes), it was one of the first regions of Greece to be inhabited. Homer (8th century BC) spoke of it as "wealthy Corinth". In 146BC, the Romans sacked and razed the city. It lay uninhabited for the next 100 years until Julius Caesar (46BC) sent a colony of veterans and freed men to the place and Corinth was rebuilt. An era of phenomenal growth and prosperity ensued. Caesar Augustus made Corinth the capital of the Province of Achaia and the residence of the Proconsul. It was built along the lines of a Roman city. The official language was Latin, but its mixed population spoke Greek.
- C. Commerce: its location was strategic because it intercepted trade (most) between Italy and Asia, plus commanded trade between the Greek mainland and the peninsula.
- D. Inhabitants: it was cosmopolitan due to a constant influx of peoples due to heavy commercial activity. The population was Roman, Greek and Jewish (large community). Estimates of between six and seven hundred thousand people.
- E. Culture: since Corinth was commercially oriented, Corinth became famous for certain products: pottery, brass, capitals and pillars. They were proud of their city and adorned it. Corinth was noted for the place where the Isthmus Games were held (they were held every two years and were second in renown only to the Olympic Games held every four years). Athletes were a common sight in Corinth (hence the reference in Corinthians). Corinth was famous for its party life (an ancient New Orleans).
- F. Morals and religion: the word "Corinthian" became a synonym for a hell raiser. To "Corinthianize" meant to engage in prostitution. To "live as a Corinthian" was to live in affluence and immorality. The immorality of Corinthian life was further cultivated by the worship of Aphrodite. There was a magnificent temple to this goddess with 1,000 female prostitutes for the free use of visitors (also worship of Venus). Temples to other gods abounded: Athena, Apollo, Poseidon, Hermes, etc. There was a pantheon, or temple, to all gods. The temple of Aesculapius, the god of healing, was there. Finally, many foreign cults had temples there.

## II. The church.

- A. Origin: founded by Paul on his second missionary journey, 1Cor.3:6,10; 4:15.
- B. Time: Paul was in Corinth from March 51AD to Sept. 52AD, one year and five months.
- C. Historical account: found in Act.18:118a (exegesis).
- D. Membership.
  - 1. The majority were gentiles, 1Cor.12:2.
  - 2. Large church consisting of Romans, Greeks and Jews.
  - 3. Slaves and free, 7:21,22; 12:3; poor, 11:21,22; middle class and a few noble and wealthy, 1:26.
  - 4. Exhibited the vices of the environment, 5:1,2,9,10.
  - 5. Manifested the intellectual arrogance of the Greek race, which prided itself in philosophical speculation, debate, letters and rhetorical skills, 1:17; 2:15.
- E. Ministry of Apollos to:
  - 1. Scripture, Act.18:27,28.
  - 2. Apollos ministered face to face while Paul was in Ephesus on his third journey (spring

5356AD) until his second visit to Corinth, Act.19:1.

3. Apollos debated the Jews in public using his knowledge of Old Testament Scriptures, his oratorical skills, plus his Alexandrian schooling in debaters technique.
4. This greatly strengthened the infant church.
5. Paul pays tribute to his ministry there, 1Cor.1:12; 3:46.

### III. The occasion for the epistle.

- A. While in Ephesus (third journey), he was in constant contact with developments in Corinth.
- B. Paul made a brief visit to Corinth while in Ephesus (the phrase "*a third time*" in 2Cor.12:14 and 13:1.
- C. Paul's contact also included a lost epistle, which he sent before 1Cor., cf. 1Cor.5:9.
- D. He gave them advice on how to deal with immoral types.
- E. But they misinterpreted his instructions, 1Cor.5:9-13.
- F. Paul's initial response was to send Timothy by way of Macedonia to troubleshoot, Act.19:21,22; cp. 1Cor.4:17.
- G. But a continual flow of bad news from the Corinthian church prompted him to write before Timothy arrived, 1Cor.1:11; 4:17; 16:10,11.
- H. The immediate occasion for this letter was a delegation from the church with a series of questions, 1Cor.16:17; cp. 7:1; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1.

### IV. Place and date.

- A. Written from Ephesus, 1Cor.16:8.
- B. From 1Cor.16 Paul implies he wrote this letter just before leaving Ephesus around Pentecost, 1Cor.16:8.
- C. So the date is early spring 56AD (see Chronological Chart of the Apostolic Age by Hoehner).

### V. The purpose of First Corinthians (an overview of the epistle's contents).

- A. General: to correct disorders in the church and to field questions they asked Paul.
- B. Paul's methodology is to alternate between the faults of the church and replies to their questions.

### VI. General Outline (based on observations of point V).

- A. Church faults, 1:10-6:20: factions, immorality and litigation before the courts.
- B. Replies to questions: marriage, separation, reconciliation and celibacy (chapter 7); doubtful things, support of the ministry and observance of the Lord's Table, chapters 8-11:1.
- C. Church faults: behavior and decorum of women in the worship service, and abuses of the Lord's Table, 1Cor.11:2-34.
- D. Reply to questions: about spiritual gifts, 1Cor.12:1-14:40.
- E. Doctrinal error: rejection and distortion of the doctrine of resurrection, chapter 15.
- F. Reply to questions: about a procedure for the offering to the Jerusalem saints, chapter 16.

### VII. Characteristics of First Corinthians.

- A. Variety of subjects.
- B. Emphasizes practical matters.
- C. But has some profound doctrinal sections.
- D. Fullest treatment of the Lord's Table in the New Testament.
- E. Chapter 12 contains a valuable discussion of the mechanics of entrance into the body of Christ.
- F. Chapter 13 contains a dissertation on love.
- G. Chapter 15 is an exhaustive study of resurrection.
- H. 1Cor.1:18-25 presents insights into GAP (the grace apparatus for perception) and the importance of doctrine.
  - I. And 1Cor.3:10-15 is an invaluable discussion of the Bema Seat.
  - J. Most businesslike of his epistles in which he deals with a wide variety of difficult, practical matters.
  - K. The Greek is fairly simple, but contains some of the most eloquent of Pauline style in chapters 13 and 15.

