



1 Corinthians

*Holiness and Hope
of a Rescued People*



Paul Barnett



CHRISTIAN FOCUS





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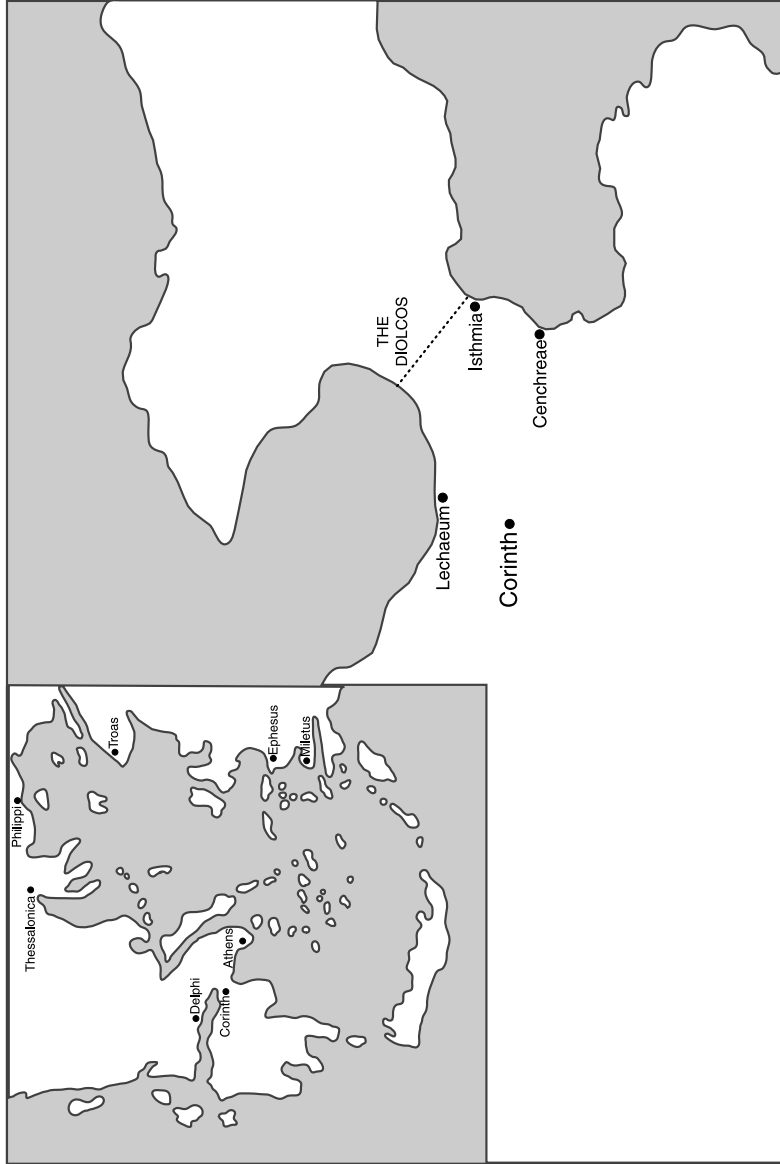
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Introduction

1. Paul's Story so far

It was only a matter of months after the crucifixion of Jesus that the young Saul of Tarsus launched his attacks on the church of God in Jerusalem. To survive the fury of his onslaught a few (the apostles) hid in the Holy City, but most fled to other places of refuge, including Damascus just beyond the historic borders of the land of Israel. The young zealot must pursue these 'Nazarenes' to that city and bring them back for trial in Jerusalem.

What happened next is so well known that a 'Damascus Road' experience is part of worldwide speech. Blinded by the bright light, the young rabbi stumbled into Damascus into the care of local believers, where he was baptized. It was then and there, apparently, that Saul 'received' the oral traditions about Christ, formulated a few months earlier in Jerusalem, and which, in turn, he was to 'deliver' to churches he established, which included Corinth sixteen years later. Two of these oral traditions – regarding the Lord's supper (11:23-26) and the outline of the gospel (15:1-7) will figure prominently in First Corinthians.

During those sixteen years Saul/Paul was to preach that Jesus crucified and risen was the Messiah of God, in fulfilment of the promises of the law and the prophets – in Damascus, Nabataea, Jerusalem, Cilicia, Syria, Phrygian Galatia, northern Asia, Macedonia and Achaia. He arrived in Corinth in late AD 49.

2. Roman Corinth

Paul the Roman citizen appears to have set his sights on Roman provinces, usually concentrating on the leading cities from which the gospel would spread throughout the province. Corinth was capital of the province of Achaia.

In classical times Corinth had been a rival of Athens. The Roman invasion of Greece, however, reduced the city to rubble in 146 BC. About a century later Julius Caesar re-established the city, but as a Roman colony. The city became a melting pot for





Greeks, Syrians, Jews and resettled Roman veterans. There were numerous slaves as well as freedmen (former slaves) in Corinth, as there were in other cities of this size.

Corinth's geographical position on the narrow 'land bridge' between the Greek peninsula and the Peloponnese was crossed by many people. Sea travellers and mercantile goods passed both ways across the Corinthian isthmus through the ports Lechaem and Cenchreae; the seas to the south of the Peloponnese were dangerous to shipping. Every two years the Isthmian games brought competitors and multitudes of spectators to Corinth. Furthermore, Corinth was noted for its manufacture of bronzes according to a secret formula. This city was famous for its prosperity.

Corinth, however, was not without its difficulties. While it was known for its wealth, there were also many impoverished people in the city, as well as slaves and those who had recently emerged from slavery. One visitor wrote of the 'sordidness of the rich and the misery of the poor', a place 'abounding in luxuries but inhabited by ungracious people'.¹

There is evidence of grave food shortages throughout the eastern Mediterranean during the later forties and early fifties resulting from crop failures in Egypt. Infrastructure for grain storage was lacking, so that times of famine meant soaring prices and rioting. Claudius made special provision for grain distribution in Greece during the years of Paul's association with Corinth. Possibly this helps explain Paul's reference to this 'present crisis' (7:26) and to his sense of outrage that the wealthy ate and drank to their fill at the Lord's supper while those who 'have not' were hungry (11:21-22).

Corinth appears to have been an exceptionally 'religious' city. Thanks to the travel writer Pausanias who came to Corinth a few years after Paul, we know of many temples for the gods, shrines for the Roman imperial family and mystery cults. Paul's pithy reference to 'many gods and many lords' (8:5) was true of the Achaian capital. This presented a grave problem for the members of the church in Corinth, many of whom remained enmeshed in 'temple culture'. This is evident throughout chapters 8-10, where

¹ Alciphron, *Letters of Parasites* 3.60, writing a century and a half later than Paul.





Paul refers to ‘an idol’ (8:4,7; 10:19), the ‘idol house’ (8:10), ‘the worship of idols’ (10:14), ‘idol-sacrificed meat’ (8:1,4,7,10; 10:19) and ‘temple-sacrificed’ meat (10:28).

Religion and politics were inextricably linked. All the cults of the gods and the mysteries expressed solidarity with local civic life and reverence towards the Roman emperors upon whom all provincial life depended. Only the Jews were excused from participating in the sacrifices. At the beginning the Christians may also have enjoyed this liberty since officially they were viewed as part of Judaism (Acts 18:12-16). Some scholars have suggested that this immunity began to be lost in the aftermath of Paul’s departure from Corinth in AD 51. It appears possible that a cult for the Roman emperor may have been established in Corinth at that time, bringing sharply increased pressure on the new church.

By the time of Paul’s visit, about a hundred years after its re-foundation, Corinth was a bustling port city, a dazzling Roman city of cosmopolitan character and brash manner. Its vigorous cultic life, however, was an ever present threat to those Gentiles who as Christians must turn their backs on the gods, the temples and their priests. Paul’s arrival in Corinth coincided with times of great hardship for the poor due to the widespread effects of famine.

3. Paul in Corinth (AD 50-51)

Paul’s initial ministry in Corinth occupied about a year and a half. On his arrival from Athens he stayed with Aquila and Priscilla, who were fellow-Jews, fellow-tentmakers and, most likely, fellow-believers. During this period Paul taught the gospel to Jews and God-fearers² in the synagogue (Acts 18:1-4). When he was rejoined from Macedonia by Silas/Silvanus and Timothy Paul intensified his ministry in Corinth which now extended to the Gentile population of Corinth. The book of Acts comments that, ‘Many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized’ (Acts 18:8).

² Gentiles who attended the synagogues, whose males were as yet uncircumcised.





4. Paul in Ephesus (AD 52-55)

It was probably soon after the middle of 51 that Paul left Corinth.³ With Priscilla and Aquila Paul visited Ephesus and leaving his companions there journeyed alone via Caesarea 'up to' Jerusalem where he greeted the church (Acts 18:22). From Jerusalem he revisited the churches from Antioch in Syria through Cilicia and southern Galatia back to Ephesus.

For the next three years (52–55) Paul taught the gospel in Ephesus. For the first three months he taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Thereafter he taught daily for two years publicly in 'the hall of Tyrannus'. Many people from the province came to hear Paul speak the word of the Lord. As well Paul proclaimed the gospel in the various house churches and to the gatherings of the wider community of believers.

Towards the latter part of Paul's ministry in Ephesus opposition to the apostle appears to have increased.⁴ At the same time Paul heard of problems back in Corinth.

5. Corinth: After Paul Left

5:1 Visiting Leaders

Silas/Silvanus and Timothy remained in Corinth when Paul left in 51, though it is not clear how long they remained. We lose track of Silvanus for the next dozen or so years until he appears in Rome as Peter's amanuensis (1 Pet. 5:12). Some time after Paul came to Ephesus Timothy rejoined him from Corinth (1 Cor. 16:10; Acts 19:22).⁵

A sequence of Christian leaders visited Corinth during Paul's stay in Ephesus. First came Apollos, the Jew from Alexandria. Apollos had heard about the preaching of John the Baptist and it is possible that Apollos had been baptized by John in the Jordan two decades earlier. Apollos did not grasp that Christ was the

³ A proconsul held office for a year from 1 July until 30 June. Having been acquitted by Gallio (Acts 18:12-16) Paul may have timed his departure to avoid a re-trial by an incoming proconsul.

⁴ 1 Cor. 15:30-32; 16:8; 2 Cor. 1:8-10; Acts 19:23-27.

⁵ It is possible that Timothy suffered a period of imprisonment in Corinth (Heb. 13:23).





fulfilment of John's preaching and baptizing until he came to the synagogue in Ephesus where Priscilla and Aquila 'showed him the way of God more accurately' (Acts 18:26). Apollos created a great impression when he came to Corinth, both for his eloquence and the power of his spiritual fervour (Acts 18:24-25, 28). In 1 Corinthians Paul addresses the new fascinations of the Corinthians in rhetoric, wisdom and 'spiritual' ministry. It is possible that Apollos' ministry had unintentionally inflamed these expressions of ministry in Corinth and made the local people somewhat dissatisfied with Paul's less spectacular approach. Paul must address the issues of wisdom and rhetoric in chapters 1-4 and 'spiritual' ministry in chapters 12-14. While Paul writes positively of Apollos, the Corinthians' request for a return visit by him does not seem to have the apostle's support at that time (16:12).

Some time later Corinth was favoured by a visit from Cephas/Peter and his wife (9:5). Peter had been a disciple of John the Baptist before becoming a disciple of Jesus. Peter was, historically, the first witness of the resurrection. From AD 33-49 Peter had been the apostle to the land of Israel, proclaiming the gospel in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria and Galilee. After the Jerusalem Council in *c.* 49 Peter began to travel outside the land of Israel. He probably revisited churches in Palestine and most likely came once more to Antioch. It is possible that he travelled through Asia Minor before coming to Corinth some time after 52. It is possible that Peter's visit, like Apollos', also unsettled the Corinthians in regard to Paul, though in different ways. Peter may have created the impression that since Paul had not been a disciple of the historical Jesus he was not fully an apostle. This would explain why Paul needed to insist on his genuine apostleship (9:1-3; 15:8-11).

Barnabas, too, may have come to Corinth. A Cypriot Jew and an early member in the Jerusalem church, Barnabas had been sent to check on the new church in Antioch. Barnabas was senior partner to Paul in the missionary journey from Antioch to Cyprus and southern Galatia. Thereafter Barnabas and Paul parted company and Barnabas went to Cyprus. Again, Barnabas' visit may have unsettled the Corinthians.

The coming of Apollos, Peter and Barnabas showed the





Corinthians that Paul was by no means the only preacher or Christian leader.

5.2 Local Leaders

It also appears that a local leader or leaders had arisen who were taking the church in a rather different direction from the founding apostle (3:10, 18; 4:18-19). These have created their own loyal followings, against one another and against Paul (4:6). These new leaders are teaching a wisdom-based message, not Christ crucified and risen. But this would be a different superstructure from the foundation Paul laid, that is, the preaching of Christ (3:10-11). The aspirations of these local usurpers has issued in arrogance and envy. Paul's famous teaching on 'love' is addressed to leaders like these who are 'envious' and 'puffed up' (13:4-5).

Paul faces these troublemakers with his admonitions in the letter, but also by urging the Corinthians to recognise responsible local people like Stephanas (16:15-18) and welcoming warmly Timothy when he comes (16:10-11). It is understandable that Paul is not too keen about Apollos returning to Corinth in the immediate future (16:12).

5.3 Issues

This is a long letter, with a number of major topics to be covered, but with many twists and turns. Is it possible to identify Paul's underlying but ultimate concerns for this church?

a. Apostolic authority. The most basic problem was the opposition to Paul's authority as an apostle. In his absence various unnamed persons have arisen to seize control of the church. These are rejecting the authority of Paul as an apostle of Christ to direct their thinking and behaviour. Paul responds to this challenge throughout the letter.⁶

b. Eschatology. In the past three years a rather different eschatology from that which Paul taught has come to the surface in Corinth. We are able to know Paul's eschatological perspectives when present in Corinth since these may be seen in First and

⁶ 1:1; 2:10-16; 3:10; 4:8-16; 9:1-3; 14:36-38; 15:8-11.



Second Thessalonians, which were written from Corinth. But the Corinthians appear to have switched their focus from the future to the present. For the Corinthians 'wisdom' had come to be associated with power and the appearance of things. Paul must remind them that the believers' hope is directed to the future, to glorious things which eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor the human heart imagined (2:6-9).

Paul must remind them that 'Christ crucified' is the 'wisdom and power of God' that overturns all human ideas of wisdom and power and which (1:17-2:5), when apprehended, opens the way to God's coming glorious kingdom.

Related to this, it seems, are the doubts of 'some' in regard to the future resurrection of the body (15:12), doubts which are corrupting the church (15:33-34) and shaking their foundations (cf. 15:58). Possibly these doubts about the future resurrection stemmed from a combination of Greek skepticism about the resurrection of the body and the Corinthians' new sense that in their new experience of the Spirit God's purposes were for now, not later (over-realized eschatology – cf. 4:8; 14:36).

If there is no resurrection of the body there will be no judgement of God in the end. If there is no judgement of God then there is no reason not to engage in bad behaviour. The members of the church could, therefore, adopt an easy-going attitude to adultery and visiting prostitutes (5:1-2; 6:9-20). Furthermore, continued involvement in the temples and partaking of idol-sacrificed meat is not a problem (chapters 8–10) – if there is no divine judgement.

Since the kingdom has come in the full flood of the Spirit, the 'sign' of marriage is dispensable since there is no marriage in the kingdom. Some wives who prophesied have removed the sign of their marital submission to their husbands (11:2-16). Other women believe that the arrival of the new age means that sexual relationships (and childbearing) should be set aside while those who are married to unbelievers are free to leave them (7:1-2, 10-11).

c. Worldliness and Individualism. Arising from their flawed eschatology is their worldliness and individualism. Paul confronts them with these twin evils at many points. They are seen in the





arrogance of upstart leaders and in the parading of ‘gifts’ of wisdom, knowledge and eloquence (1:5; 8:1-3, 10; 10:12). Their enhanced sense of knowledge and wisdom blinded them to the effects their liberty (in attending temples) was having on weaker Christians. Yet they appeared not to care about the impact of their behaviour on others. The preoccupation with ‘spiritual gifts’ that enhance the ego of the one who speaks demonstrates well the individualism of the Corinthians. Paul must teach them that the true evidence of the Spirit is conversion and that ‘gifts’ are given for the upbuilding of the ‘body’ of believers; if they are not used in ‘love’ for them they are quite valueless.

d. Scandal in Corinth. The church in Corinth was a new social grouping and Paul was concerned lest it create a bad impression in the city. There were quite a number of aspects of the life of the Corinthians that would have provoked negative comment locally. One example is the adultery of a man with his stepmother, a sin not found even among pagans (5:1). A second is the practice of church members taking one another to the public courts. This told the wider community that these Christians were a disorderly lot ! (6:1-8). A third example is the women prophets who are casting off the ‘sign’ of their submission in marriage (11:13-14). A fourth is the factions apparent at the Lord’s supper (11:17-22), especially at a time of food shortage. A fifth is the chaos in the meetings with the babble of tongues, prophets talking over the top of one another and wives calling out questions across the meeting (14:26-40).

Such behaviour would have attracted serious criticism in a city like Corinth, where good order in cult groups was important. Surviving rules governing mystery cults reveal that disorder was unacceptable. These groups governed themselves strictly so as to avoid scandal in the community. The Bacchic society insisted that, ‘No one shall deliver a speech without recognition by the priest or vice-priest.’⁷ The Cult of Zeus Most High decreed that, ‘It shall not be permissible...to make factions (*schismata*)...to

⁷ Cited in J. Harrison, ‘Paul’s House Churches and the Cultic Associations,’ *Reformed Theological Review* 58 (1999), page 40.





abuse one another or to chatter or to indict or accuse...'⁸ We note that Paul accuses the Corinthians of creating 'schisms' (*schismata* – 1:10; 11:18; 12:25), chattering (14:26-40) and 'indicting and accusing'!

These and other examples from the period cast light on much of this letter and indicate that Paul was sensitive to a church developing a bad reputation. Many of Paul's concerns found in First Corinthians arise from his awareness that the behaviour of the Corinthians may have fallen below the standards that applied to other groups at that time.

This is relevant. Modern societies are deeply conscious of ethical issues. Professional associations adopt strong moral codes and discipline their members where necessary. It is a scandal when standards of behaviour in the church fall below those of the community. Believers must not allow their standards to be less than the standards of various groups within the community.

6. Paul's Literary Genius

Hints scattered throughout the letter help us understand how the letter came to be written. First, reports of problems were brought from Corinth to Ephesus by Chloe's retainers and Stephanas and his assistants. These told of factions, adultery, wives casting off their hair covering when prophesying, selfish actions at the Lord's supper and doubts about the future resurrection.

At about the same time a letter had also been sent from Corinth apparently seeking Paul's clarification on six questions. For the most part, however, these questions are couched in argumentative tones. Surely it is right for women to abstain from sexual relations (7:1)? Has a father really done wrong in betrothing his older than-usual daughter for marriage (7:25)? Surely it is acceptable to dine in an idol-house (8:1)? Surely 'tongues-speaking' is the true sign of the Spirit (12:1)? How long must we put money aside for this collection (16:1)? Surely Apollos will come back to us soon (16:12)?

Paul could have dealt with the reports, then answered the questions. He might have done this in a few pages. Rather, he

⁸ Harrison, 'House Churches,' page 41.





analyses these reports and questions and finds five broad topics. These he presents as a sequence of pastoral sermons for the upbuilding of the church in Corinth and elsewhere. Paul takes his readers through each topic with meticulous care. It is important they know his teachings, yet in such a way that they learn to think in a Christian way.

Chapter

True wisdom and false	1–4
Holiness in sexuality	5–7
Idolatry and temple worship	8–10
The gathered church	11–14
The abolition of death	15

In chapter sixteen Paul outlines his future plans and finishes with words of strong encouragement.

This is a truly great letter. Careful attention to its message, but also its method of Christian reasoning, will bring the blessings of God to those who patiently work through it.

