Ruins of Corinth, Greece, Today

First Corinthians

A STUDY OF
THE CHURCH THAT CHANGED A CONTINENT
AND THE MAN WHO LED IT
PAUL, THE APOSTLE

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THE CHURCH THAT CHANGED A CONTINENT AND THE MAN WHO LED IT

FIRST CORINTHIANS

STUDY NUMBER 1 / INTRODUCTION
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In about the year A.D. 57, a man sat down in Ephesus, Turkey, to write an extensive letter
to followers of Christ in Corinth, Greece. That man was the Apostle Paul.

Paul had been greatly responsible for the establishment of a Christian community in
Corinth not long before. That was no easy task for Corinth, a major seaport of Rome,
was a wicked and wild city. It was known as “Vanity Fair” of the ancient world.
There were two things for which Corinth, then a city of 400,000, was known:

1. Commercial prosperity
2. Unparalleled evil

Someone has said that if one stood in Piccadilly Circus in London long enough, he or she
would meet everyone in the country. If that is true, then Corinth was the Piccadilly
Circus of the entire Mediterranean. Even on the sports scene, Corinth was the home of
the Isthmian Games which were second only to he Olympics.

You should note on the map (which traces Paul’s second missionary journey) on page 2
of these notes that Greece looks like an elongated hourglass designed by Picasso. The
north and south of Greece are connected by a narrow neck of land known as an
“isthmus.” Corinth was strategically situated on that narrow “neck,” only a mile or so
west of the Ionian Sea (a part of the Mediterranean Sea that separates Italy and Greece)
and just a few miles further to the great port of Cenchrea on the Aegean Sea.

The commerce of the world flowed through the two harbors connected with the city of
Corinth. The population consisted of Greeks, Jews, Italians, and a mixed multitude.
Sailors, merchants, adventurers, and refugees from all corners of the Roman Empire filled
the streets of Corinth. Most shipping traffic came right past Corinth. Why so?
Because the extreme southern tip of Greece was known as Cape Matapan. It was very
dangerous for shipping to go that route so many of the ships were unloaded and dragged
on logs or rollers clear across the Isthmus. (Later the Corinthian Canal was started by
Nero but not finished for hundreds of years.) This four mile journey across the strip of
land saved a journey of two hundred miles around the Cape, the most dangerous route for
ships in the entire Mediterranean Sea.
Above is a map of Paul's second missionary journey. Follow the arrows starting in Jerusalem. Paul and Silas went north to Antioch of Syria and then into southern Turkey - Tarsus to Iconium to Antioch and to the coast port of Troas. From there the two became the first known missionaries in Europe, entering that continent at Neapolis (called Kavala today) and on to Philippi where they were beaten and imprisoned. From there Paul journeyed to Berea and Thessalonica and south to Athens and on to Corinth. From there he went back to Turkey to Ephesus (where he wrote I Corinthians back to the followers of Christ in Corinth) and then back to Jerusalem.

THE HISTORY OF CORINTH AND PAUL'S INVOLVEMENT WITH IT

The city of Corinth was founded about 1,000 B.C. but it was destroyed by an earthquake in 146 B.C. Just 100 years later, Julius Caesar rebuilt the city and it became a Roman colony. Further, the city became the metropolis capital of Greece.

Being the seaport city it was, the place became known for its vice. About the year 53 A.D., into Corinth came the great first missionary/theologian, the Apostle Paul! It had not been Paul's intent to go into Europe at all, but the Holy Spirit directed his path in a way he did not expect:

Acts 16:1-2 and 3-10

Paul came first to Derbe, then Lystra. He found a disciple there by the name of
Timothy, son of a devout Jewish mother and Greek father. [2] Friends in Lystra and Iconium all said what a fine young man he was. [4] As they traveled from town to town, they presented the simple guidelines the Jerusalem apostles and leaders had come up with. [5] That turned out to be most helpful. Day after day the congregations became stronger in faith and larger in size. [6] They went to Phrygia, and then on through the region of Galatia. Their plan was to turn west into Asia province, but the Holy Spirit blocked that route. [7] So they went to Mysia and tried to go north to Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them go there either. [8] Proceeding on through Mysia, they went down to the seaport Troas. [9] That night Paul had a dream: A Macedonian stood on the far shore and called across the sea, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" [10] The dream gave Paul his map. We went to work at once getting things ready to cross over to Macedonia. All the pieces had come together. We knew now for sure that God had called us to preach the good news to the Europeans.

RELIGIOUS LIFE IN CORINTH

You have heard of the Acropolis in Athens. Some folks mistakenly believe the Acropolis is a building; however, it is only the large rocky terrain upon which the Parthenon sits. Several cities in Greece have an acropolis, including Corinth. On top of this 1500 ft high rock sat a magnificent temple built for the Greek goddess Aphrodite - or Venus as we know her by the Roman moniker. Its “ministers” were over a thousand priestesses who were actually prostitutes. Sex was the religion.

"The very name Corinth was synonymous with debauchery and there was one source of evil in the city which was known all over the civilized world. To that temple of Aphrodite there were attached a thousand “sacred prostitutes.” In the evenings, they descended from the Acropolis and plied their trade upon the streets of Corinth until it became a Greek proverb: ‘It is not every man who can afford a journey to Corinth.’ In addition to these cruder sins, there flourished far more recondite vices, which had come in with traders and the sailors from the ends of the earth, until Corinth became not only a synonym for wealth and luxury, drunkenness and debauchery, but also for filth.”

THE LETTERS TO THE CORINTHIANS / WILLIAM BARCLAY / WESTMINSTER PRESS / PAGE 3

Consider the situation: Into this cesspool came the Apostle Paul, recently beaten half-to-death in Philippi (in the north), mocked in Athens, and traveling alone into Corinth, not knowing what awaited him - except GOD HAD SENT HIM THERE.
The book of Acts give us rather detailed reports of Paul’s activities in this major city:

Acts 18:1-18

After these things Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth; [2] And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them. [3] And because he was of the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers. [4] And he reasoned in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks. [5] And when Silas and Timotheus were come from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ. [6] And when they opposed themselves, and blasphemed, he shook his raiment, and said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles. [7] And he departed thence, and entered into a certain man's house, named Justus, one that worshipped God, whose house joined hard to the synagogue. [8] And Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized. [9] Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: [10] For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city. [11] And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

[12] And when Gallio was the deputy of Achaia, the Jews made insurrection with one accord against Paul, and brought him to the judgment seat, [13] Saying, This fellow persuadeth men to worship God contrary to the law. [14] And when Paul was now about to open his mouth, Gallio said unto the Jews, If it were a matter of wrong or wicked lewdness, O ye Jews, reason would that I should bear with you: [15] But if it be a question of words and names, and of your law, look ye to it; for I will be no judge of such matters. [16] And he drave them from the judgment seat. [17] Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the chief ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat. And Gallio cared for none of those things.

[18] And Paul after this tarried there yet a good while, and then took his leave of the brethren, and sailed thence into Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila; having shorn his head in Cenchrea: for he had a vow.

Now this is not a study on the Book of Acts, so I will not dwell long with this portion of Scripture dealing with Paul’s ministry in Corinth. Our interest will be in Paul’s first letter back to the believers there, a letter we know as FIRST CORINTHIANS. While ministering in Ephesus, Turkey, sometime later, Paul became aware of difficulties that had surfaced in the church in Corinth. He wrote FIRST CORINTHIANS to correct some of the errors that had come into that church. Most scholars believe there was a
letter to the Corinthians that even preceded FIRST CORINTHIANS; however, we do not have that document. We do know, however, that Paul wrote such a letter for he testifies of it himself in 1 Cor. 5:9: “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators:”

And, as we know, Paul even later wrote another letter to the believers in Corinth and we call that letter SECOND CORINTHIANS.

We will break this book of FIRST CORINTHIANS into three segments:

1. Opening - or salutation - Chapter 1:1-9
2. Carnalities - Chapter 1:10-11:34
3. Spiritualities - Chapters 12-16 dealing with spiritual gifts

As we make this study together, I believe you will begin to see, if you don’t already, why we conduct First Assembly of God in the way we do. As God leads us we attempt to follow Scripture closely. It is Christ’s “body” and we should please Him in all we do.

In that effort, we do not always please all people. I always refer those who question our motives or efforts to scripture, particularly the Book of Acts and the Book of First Corinthians. May God bless us and illuminate our hearts and minds as we make this journey together.

CHAPTER ONE

1 Cor. 1:1-3

Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, [2] Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: [3] Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first four chapters of I Corinthians deal with the divided state of the Church in Corinth. Instead of being a unity in Christ, it was split into sects and parties who had attached themselves to the names of various leaders and teachers. It is Paul’s teaching that these divisions had emerged because the Corinthians thought too much about human wisdom and knowledge and too little about the sheer grace of God.

In the first ten verses of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians the name of Jesus Christ occurs no fewer than ten times. Sometimes in the Church we try to deal with a difficult
situation in our own mental or spiritual power. Paul did none of these things; to his 
difficult situation he took Jesus Christ, and it was in the light of the Cross of Christ and 
the love of Christ that he sought to deal with it.

THE LETTERS TO THE CORINTHIANS / WILLIAM BARCLAY / PAGES 8 AND 9 / WESTMINSTER PRESS

APOSTLES

• Paul opened his letter to the Corinthians by calling himself an “apostle of Jesus 
  Christ.” Who is an apostle?

When Paul wrote yet another letter - this one back to the church in Ephesus, he declared: 
Ephes. 4:11-12

  And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, 
pastors and teachers; [12] For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, 
for the edifying of the body of Christ:

First of all, apostle are those original twelve men who walked and worked with Jesus on 
earth 2000 years ago. Still other apostles are mentioned in the New Testament who 
possessed special authority within the church - such as Paul, Barnabas and James, the 
half-brother of Jesus.

But the term “apostle” was used in the New Testament in a non-technical sense to identify
COMMISSIONED REPRESENTATIVES OF A CHURCH such as a messenger 
appointed and sent as a missionary or for some other special responsibility. Romans 
16:7 Salute Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen, and my fellowprisoners, who are 
of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.

In the Assemblies of God we believe in apostolic ministry. Yes, there are apostles. Who 
are they? Certainly successful missionaries must be considered as such. Our good 
friend Mike Chowning who, with his wife Heather, have now opened 525 churches in 
Siberia would certainly be considered as an apostle.

SANCTIFIED IN CHRIST (verse 2) AND CALLED TO BE SAINTS

My friend, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ and have truly committed yourself to Him 
and His leadership, the Word declares that you are a saint.

SANCTIFIED - means set apart for Christ. There are two aspects to sanctification:

POSITIONAL SANCTIFICATION When you commit your life to Jesus, God
considered you “sanctified” because of the “righteousness of Christ” imputed - or placed - within you. This is why our FAITH is based on Jesus, not our own good works (which are, to God, as filthy rags). Does positional sanctification mean we are perfect? No. Our “perfection” is only in Christ, not ourselves. However, positional sanctification ought to influence the way we think about ourselves and, like David, pray that our thoughts and words are acceptable in HIS sight.

PRACTICAL SANCTIFICATION Our growth in Christ is a continuum. That upward line does not always progress in a straight line. There are times when we “drop the ball,” so to speak. But the over-all trajectory or our lives should be an over-all upward journey. Let us not grow weary in our well doing. Paul states this so well in 1 Cor. 1:6-7 Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: [7] So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ:

Saints of God sometimes become discouraged when they fail the Lord in some endeavor and want to quit. We should remember that God is our Heavenly Father and we are His children. Do we throw out our children when they throw a temper tantrum or break a dish or cry in public? No, we continue to love and train them.

WHO’S AT FAULT HERE?

1 Cor. 1:8

Who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He says “blameless,” he does not say “faultless.” There will always be someone who will find fault with you. But you are not to be worthy of blame. The blood of Jesus Christ who is our Advocate (our attorney) before the Father represents us. Can we count on His advocacy? Oh - hear the glorious truth from Paul:

1 Cor. 1:9

God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

We know that we human beings are not always perfect. And there are those who for one reason or another want to call others’ attention to it. Shake it off. We want others to love and appreciate us, but, if they don’t, the bottom line is this: Is Jesus happy with us? If He is, then we have had a good day, my friend. And let the wolves howl to their hearts’ content. Thank God we are sanctified in Christ. And onward and upward we go.
THE CHURCH IN CORINTH IS SPLINTERED!

Paul will address himself in this epistle to problems in the Corinthians church. Right away we see that one of the major obstacles is that the saints there are fractionalized.

1 Cor. 1:10-12

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. [11] For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. [12] Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ.

The problem here is “schisma” - that is fighting, gossip, criticism, hatred, bitterness, divisions among professing followers of Jesus Christ. To put this passage in just good old modern English:

“I have learned,” writes Paul, “that you Pentecostals don’t like the Baptists, and you Baptists don’t like much of anybody else, and some of you are followers of Oral Roberts and others of you are disciples of Joel Osteen; some of you are pre-tribbers and others of you insist on going through the seven years of hell on earth and you are pretty uptight about it. Some of you like modern fast music with a bunch of guitars and others of you love the Wesleyan hymns accompanied by a pipe organ – and you fight about it. What’s the matter with you people? The issue is CHRIST!”

There were three great spiritual leaders who had accessed that Corinthian Church:

1. Paul 2. Peter (Cephas) 3. Apollos

All three were great leaders in early Christianity. But, unfortunately, the people were followers of them even more than they were of Christ. One little group says, “Oh, we love brother Paul because he’s so spiritual.” Another group says, “We like Peter because he pounds the pulpit and is so evangelistic.” Another says, “We love this man Apollos. He soars to the heights and he reaches the multitude.” (So observed J. Vernon McGee.)

What these factions forgot was that all three of these men were God’s men, followers of Christ, and fashioned by God TO BE WHAT THEY WERE. The issue was Jesus - not His proclaimers.

Now Paul hits them with this logic: 1 Cor. 1:13

Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?
I want to make a very bold statement here: ANYTHING THAT CAUSES DIVISIONS OR SCHISMS IN THE BODY OF CHRIST IS UNHOLY. And yet there are many issues, personalities or causes that would bring splinters in the Body of our Lord.

I am willing to identify with any body of believers that remain constantly true to historic Christian doctrine. That includes:

- the virgin birth of Christ
- the full salvation atonement on the cross of Christ
- the deity of Jesus
- Christ’s death on the cross
- His bodily resurrection
- the promise of His return
- the full credibility of the entire Word of God, given us by the Holy Spirit

I can have good fellowship with any follower of our Lord who fully subscribes to these key issues. Now denominations have different interpretations of scripture such as healing in the atonement, evidence of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, etc. I believe fully and completely in the 16 doctrines of faith subscribed to in the Assemblies of God; however, I do not believe we are the only ship floating on the ecclesiastical seas! So I thank the Lord for my brothers and sisters in other churches and fellowships and will work with them in any way that I possibly can. Thank the Lord for my Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Church of God, Nazarene - etc., - brothers who still hold fast to the faith of our fathers and historic Christian beliefs based on the infallible Word of God!

THE FOOLISHNESS OF PREACHING

Ah, ah, ah - careful there: I didn’t write “foolish preaching.” There’s plenty and enough of that floating around. What Paul is discussing here is the communication of the Gospel that the world system finds strange:

1 Cor. 1:17-23

For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.

[18] For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. [19] For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. [20] Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? [21] For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. [22] For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks
seek after wisdom: [23] But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a
stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness;

Note carefully Paul’s words in verse 17: THE CROSS OF CHRIST! The cross is what
divides mankind. It doesn’t divide born-again people, but it certainly divides believers
from the rest of mankind. Don’t even consider - not for a single moment - that all faiths
are alike, that all roads lead to Rome. Hear Paul’s words: WE PREACH CHRIST
CRUCIFIED!

To these natives of Greece, the cross was sheer insanity. Note their initial reaction when
Paul first visited them:

Acts 18:6
And when they opposed themselves, and blasphemed, he shook his raiment, and
said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I
will go unto the Gentiles.

Listen to this: Paul’s method was this: “I will go such and such a town and preach
Christ, His crucifixion and resurrection. If people accept this message, great - I will stay
and begin a church. If they refused to accept it, I have delivered my soul and will move
on to a new place. I am not going to waste my time preaching to the same doubters over
and over again.” The apostles “shook the dust off their feet” and went to areas where
they could make progress for the Kingdom.

In our own town there are churches that go through pastor after pastor, teacher after
teacher, absolutely refusing to adhere to the Word of God. Recently I was asked to meet
with their leadership. I refused to do so as did our sectional presbyter. Why? We are
not going over and over the same issues and their adamant refusal to do what the Word of
God requires.

I love the way Paul ends this first chapter: 1 Cor. 1:31
That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.

We sing, TO GOD BE THE GLORY! Absolutely, for it is none of us who achieve
anything but the power of God within us.

NEXT WEEK: CHAPTER TWO - HOW TO HAVE POWER WITH GOD