

| 1 Corinthians |

Week 1 | Acts 18; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Historical Context and Overview

Where

Corinth was a major cosmopolitan city located approximately 40-50 miles west of Athens and was also the capital of the Roman province, Achaia. It is strategically located on the “isthmus” (land bridge) between mainland Greece and the Peloponnesian peninsula and was *the* center of the east-west trade routes as it was between two major seaports. Historically a Greek province, Corinth was believed to be repopulated by *freedmen* from Rome whose status would have been just over that of a slave. “This was a convenient way for Rome to rid itself of potential trouble, on the one hand, and for the freedman to seize an opportunity for socioeconomic advancement, on the other.”¹ This came with an influx of people from both east and west, with both benefits and drawbacks. As such, Corinth was a melting pot of cultural and religious influences where “anything goes.” The city had a reputation much like Las Vegas (aka “Sin City”), known for catering to immorality. To be called a “Corinthian” insinuated immoral debauchery.² If a Corinthian was portrayed in a Greek play, he was often shown as drunk.³

Roman culture was polytheistic and mostly inclusive, making accommodation for many gods. There were approximately 26 sacred places devoted to these gods throughout the city. However, among these sacred places, a partial lintel with the inscription “synagogue of the Hebrews” has been discovered.⁴ This is indicative of the presence of Jews in the region. The Jewish religion was one of many, but, as a monotheistic religion (and also non-inclusive) it was very peculiar to the area. The location of Corinth was a double-edged sword for the church. While the church would have opportunity to impact many people from many cultures, the church could be negatively influenced by the world.

Who

After visiting Athens, the Apostle Paul traveled to Corinth where he met a Messianic-Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla, who were expelled from Rome along with other Jews by Claudius Caesar, which occurred ca. AD 49.⁵ They were “tentmakers” by trade and likely had a shop in the *agora* of Corinth, which served both as a market and a gathering place for social, political, and religious engagement. Paul, also a “tentmaker,” stayed with them while in Corinth as both his means for support as well as his basis for ministry.⁶ Aquila and Priscilla would prove to be valuable assets to Paul’s ministry in Corinth (1 Cor 16:19), Ephesus (Acts 18:19) and Rome (Rom 16:3-5).⁷

When Paul left Corinth for Ephesus, a fervent Jew named Apollos was using the Hebrew Scriptures to show the Jews that “the Christ was Jesus” (Acts 18:28) which was the same focus for Paul (18:5).⁸

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 2.

² “Old Corinth had gained such a reputation for sexual vice that Aristophanes (ca. 450–385 B.C.) coined the verb *korinthiazō* (= to act like a Corinthian, i.e., to commit fornication).” Fee, 2.

³ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians* (Louisville, KY; Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 3.

⁴ Fee, 3.

⁵ Cf. Acts 18:2. John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 382–83. We are also told that Gallio was proconsul of Achaia (18:12) which was ca. AD 52-53.

⁶ Cf. Acts 20:34; 1 Cor 4:12; 1 Thes 2:9; 2 Thes 3:8. It was common practice for tradesmen to sleep above their shops in the agora, thus Paul stayed with them and maintained a presence in the city. The modern term “tentmaker ministry” implies a pastor who also holds another job in order to support his ministry.

⁷ “From these *Latin* names one would conclude that [Aquila and Priscilla] had resided so long in Rome as to lose their Jewish family names.” Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 2 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 203.

⁸ The only Scriptures that any of the early church possessed was the Hebrew Tanakh, or the Old Testament Scriptures.

Because Apollos was both scripturally literate and eloquent, he had lasting impact on the church in Ephesus and also in Corinth some time after Paul had left (19:1).⁹

Christians were an unusual people against the Corinthian backdrop. Rather than have an overt impact on their city, the cultural and religious influences were having an overt impact on them. This was becoming evident in their theology and their lifestyle. In fact, so much of Corinth's influence was invading the Christians way of life that they were almost becoming indistinguishable from the Corinthians around them.¹⁰

Occasion and Purpose

The Bible book we call "First Corinthians" is at least the *second* letter Paul wrote to this church.¹¹ In this letter, Paul is not setting out an exhaustive list of systematic theology. Rather, Paul's letters are generally written as a gospel response to particular problems that arose in the primitive Christian community.¹² The problems of the church at Corinth were made known to Paul through individual messengers (1 Cor 1:11) and also by a written letter (7:1). Among the issues brought to the table are unity (chs. 1-4), sexual purity (5-7), food offered to idols (8-10), the church gathering (11-14), and the resurrection (15). Paul meets each issue with a gospel response, tying everything back to Jesus.

In 1 Cor 1:1-9, Paul opens with a salutation indicative of his authority as an apostle of Christ Jesus "called by the will of God." He first affirms the Christian Corinthians' identity as the church *of God*, sanctified in Jesus (1 Cor 1:2), reminding them that they, too, are called by God.¹³ Addressing them in this way sets the stage for the rest of the letter. In spite of the issues later addressed, Paul gives thanks for the Corinthian church because of the grace of God that has been given to them, for their enriched speech and knowledge,¹⁴ and for their God-given gifts (1:4-7). Though Paul saw who they are to become in Christ, he also must address how they are not living a life consistent with this call. The Corinthian church as a whole, in some ways, viewed themselves as *superior* to others because they considered themselves "spiritual" (πνευματικός, pneu-ma-tee-kos).¹⁵ To this, Paul reminds them that they are "called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ" (1:2). They are the heirs of the same grace available to all who put their faith in Jesus.

Paul's desire is not simply for the modification of their behavior, but that they be aligned with who they are called to be in Christ. He is appealing to the Corinthian church to exchange their carnal, cultural lenses for gospel lenses. The cultural influences of Rome in general, and Corinth in particular, were imposing themselves on the members of the Corinthian church and skewed their perspective. Like a loving father, Paul has his sights set on who the church is called to be, seeing a church who will be sustained to the end, "guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ," (1 Cor 1:8). Though he is calling the church to a faithful response to the gospel, he is quick to remind them of God's faithfulness. "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1:9).

⁹ Apollos was fervent about proclaiming Jesus but he also had some inaccurate theology. This is evident in Acts 18:25. The impact of Apollos' innocent inaccuracies was met by Paul in Ephesus (Acts 19:2-7). Yet, he is teachable and gained full support of other Christians.

¹⁰ Fee, 19.

¹¹ In 1 Cor 5:9, Paul references another letter he had previously written to them, and in 1 Cor 7:1, he references a letter that the Corinthian church had sent to him, probably by the hands of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16:15-17).

¹² Paul is referred to as a *contextual theologian*, contextualizing the gospel "in ways that intersect the concrete lives and cultures of his hearers." Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 2005), 89.

¹³ In Paul's previous letters (chronologically), 1 and 2 Thessalonians, his salutation begins, "To the church of the Thessalonians in God..." Contrast with 1 Corinthians, "To the church *of God* that is in Corinth."

¹⁴ Paul gives thanks for their "speech" (*logos*) and "knowledge" (*gnosis*), which are evident, but this is likely an area where the Corinthian church is a little too self-confident. As the text goes on, we see a recurring theme of both *logos* (sometimes translated "word," "speech," or "talk") and *gnosis* and how, while the Corinthian church thinks they have arrived, spiritually, they are still very carnal in their thinking. Paul contrasts their carnal *logos* and their carnal *gnosis* with the *logos* of the cross and the *gnosis* of the Spirit (Cf. Fee, 37).

¹⁵ *Pneumatikos* occurs 15 times in 1 Corinthians, alone, and only occurs 9 times in the rest of Paul's letters, combined.