

Series on First Corinthians

By Doug Hamilton

Authorship, Date and Location of Letter

The letter to the Corinthian Christians was composed by the apostle Paul and likely handwritten by Sosthenes. *1 Corinthians 1:1, Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother.* It is not a strange that Paul would dictate his inspired thought for another writer. His words were inspired, but his penmanship was not. *Galatians 6:11, See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.* The letter was likely written approximately AD 55 from the location of Ephesus.

The Reason for the Letter

There had been divisive quarrels within the church and Paul wanted to firmly address it. Paul and Timothy were about to make another visit to them, so the apostle wanted them to be ready for when he arrived. Paul had been hearing bad-conduct reports from Corinth and felt it best to give them foreknowledge of his pending visit so they could get things in order.

Background History of Corinth

Corinth was a major city in the eastern Peloponnese of Greece. It had about 100,000 residents of the area and lay near the narrow isthmus that joined the Peloponnese to the mainland. The city lay at the southern foot of a mountain, Akrocorinth (elevation 1883 feet), which also served as a location for some of the cults of the city. Atop this mountain was the prior location of the Temple of Aphrodite. It sported a thousand sacred prostitutes for which pagan men would hike uphill 1,800 feet to worship. It was with that history in mind that Paul wrote *1 Corinthians 6:19, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?"*

The original city of Corinth dates back to the sixth century BC. In 164 BC, Corinth joined together with many other cities to fight Roman domination, but lost and was completely destroyed. It was rebuilt in AD 44, following the assassination of Julius Caesar.

Corinthia was actually the name of the state in Greece and was a double-ported, prized location of the Mediterranean. The Saronic Gulf was on the east and on the west was the Corinthian Gulf. In order to save time traveling around the whole peninsula, Rome built a four mile road to physically move their fleet and freight by land from harbor to harbor. It would save them considerable time. Since then, the Greek government has carved a large canal which allows barges and large ships to never leave the water.

Spiritual Life

Corinth was steeped in paganism. As mentioned, it was the primary location city of the goddess Aphrodite. Needless to say immorality was running rampant in Corinth. There was



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actually a term commonly used in that day to describe great immorality, “*to Corinthianize*”. Immorality was one of the primary problems was in Corinth.

Dionysius, the god of wine, was also heavily worshipped by the populace. Upon entering the city, they would have come across a large, strategically arranged mosaic of his image. They would stare at it, being tricked by its allusion, and feel compelled to inebriate in his honor.



A large mosaic of Dionysius from the city of Corinth

Introduction to Christianity

Paul brought Christianity to the location in *Acts 18:1–4*, *After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth.* ² *And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them,* ³ *and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers.* ⁴ *And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.*

This event occurred about AD 51 and he would stay for eighteen months on the initial visit, resulting in many converts. We find some of the early conversions were Crispus and his household. *Acts 18:8*, “*Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.*” This is further confirmed in *1 Corinthians 1:14*, “*I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius*”.

While there, he met a couple from Rome, named Priscilla and Aquila. They were recently kicked out of Italy as per Claudius’ two year decree to expel all Jews out of Rome. It appears that these they were with Paul when he departed for Asia. *Romans 16:19*, *The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.* They would prove to be great comrades, even making and selling tents to pay their way.

Chapter 1: Strong Division and Strong Wisdom

Chapter 1:1-3 The Opening of the Letter

1 Corinthians 1:1-3, Paul, called *as* an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, ²*To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours:* ³ *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

It is in the opening of the letter that we find it was co-authored by both Paul and Sosthenes. It is also important to note that only Paul was the apostle, carrying with it the apostolic authority we have become accustomed to. This is the same Sosthenes that was willing to be beaten for his conviction of faith in *Acts 28:7*, *And they all took hold of Sosthenes, the*

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leader of the synagogue, and began beating him in front of the judgment seat. But Gallio was not concerned about any of these things. This should be no surprise since his mentor Paul was persecuted from the very onset in Corinth. Acts 18:12, “*But while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat*” The stone for which Paul was chained to in Corinth before Gallio still stands to this day. Paul held firm to the concept that the world will ultimately persecute those who are preaching Christ’s gospel. 2 Timothy 1:9, “*Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God*”



The letter was addressed to the church in Corinth. This is in contrast to the second letter which was addressed to the saints of Achia. Paul referred to them as the *ekklesia* (church), a phrase they would have clearly understood. When the Greeks had public meetings of the citizenship, the people were “*called out*” for the official city business. It is the same terminology which Peter used when he said “*so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light*” (1 Peter 2:9). Not only are they called out, but also sanctified. He used the word “*saint*” He claims they have been sanctified, which means set apart. That is the word *saint*: the one who is set apart.

The term “*grace and peace*” was a common term of greeting from the Jewish world. Interestingly *grace* comes from the word *charis*, which is equivalent to the Hebrew term *shalom* (peace). This was the most common greeting of the day and also of Paul in the New Testament.



Temple of Zeus at the entrance of Corinth.

Chapter 1:4-9 Thanksgiving

⁴ I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, ⁶ even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

We must remember that the church was very divided because of lack of humility toward each other. What better way to begin a letter than to remind them that they are undeserving of God’s grace which was bestowed on them in the beginning. How did they receive this enrichment? It was through the speaking of the word and the knowledge they possessed in the end. God had completed their testimony because He backed it up with miraculous faculties, inclusive to speaking and the gift of knowledge, both of which will be spoken of in chapter 12.

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Even though the mindset of the Roman was that they would always be a world power, , Paul confirmed the reality of temporal at the coming of Christ. The Christian must view this world as temporal and soon to fade away if they are going to be in line with God's thinking. Another phrase emphasizing this is the "day of the Lord", a common phrase from the OT, echoing that this earth and her ways will someday meet its end.

- Amos 5:18–20, Alas, you who are longing for the day of the LORD, For what purpose *will* the day of the LORD *be* to you? It *will be* darkness and not light; ¹⁹ As when a man flees from a lion And a bear meets him, Or goes home, leans his hand against the wall And a snake bites him. ²⁰ *Will* not the day of the LORD *be* darkness instead of light, Even gloom with no brightness in it?
- Joel 2:31, "The sun will be turned into darkness And the moon into blood Before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.

Chapter 1:10-17 "Great Divisiveness"

1 Corinthians 1:10-17, Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. ¹¹ For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's *people*, that there are quarrels among you. ¹² Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." ¹³ Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one would say you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.

Chloe's people were likely slaves within the household. They obviously had informed Paul of the incredible pettiness concerning their "Christian" approach to each other. We must remember that the primary reason for writing this letter was to deal with all their divisiveness. Paul encouraged them to be of the same mind and of the same judgment. It was not a matter of simple, trivial matters for which they were to agree, but from the core teachings. The word that Paul used for appeal was one with authority. Better said, "I order you to be of the same mind and judgment." He could do this because he had apostolic authority.

One of the great quarrels among them was over who the individual Corinthian Christians were baptized by. Instead of being focused on Whom one was baptized into, that is the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, it had become a point of bragging. Some were exalting themselves as being baptized by Paul, some Apollos and yet others Peter. Some actually claimed the right thing by saying they were of Christ.

It is of interest to note that a common phrase of the pagans in Corinth was "*I am of Aphrodite*." This was their way of saying that they had gone all the way in their pagan worship even to the immoralities of the Temple of Aphrodite. This what happened when they took a

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pagan view into a real relationship with God. Our Father will have no other gods before Him and that includes any connection to other gods as well. When they were focusing on who baptized them instead of Christ, they were playing to old Aphrodite idolatry game.

There are those of the “baptismless movement” who like to quote verse 17 in an attempt to “prove” that baptism is not important. That was not what Paul was saying, but that his focus was to preach the gospel inclusive to baptism. He did not come to establish the most baptisms, but to preach Christ crucified (2:2), including baptism as part of it. The mere fact that he admitted baptizing respondents to his preaching, combined with the actual record of this from the Book of Acts, confirms this is what he taught. He is simply saying that he was an instrument in God’s hand to spread the gospel of salvation. To conclude a “Baptismless” gospel is nothing more than a disingenuous attempt to cling to false teaching that leads to false conversion and false hopes. This “baptismless” gospel has even lead to division in the church today.

Application:

How did the Corinthian Christians go from following Christ to wicked division over something that is so obviously wrong? Perhaps it was because of the unique strengths of one person over another. Apollos was an “*eloquent man*” (Acts 18:24), whereas Paul was not (2 Corinthians 11:6). Paul was mighty with the pen (2 Corinthians 10:10), whereas Peter was not (2 Peter 3:15). Peter was leader among the apostles (Matthew 16:18, Acts 2, 11), but Apollos was not even an apostle.

Everybody brings something to the table, but no man brings the table. We all have strengths and weaknesses, but only Christ had all strengths. It is about Christ and not the servants of Christ. God is the ultimate focus, not mere men. *1 Corinthians 3:4-7, For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not mere men? ⁵ What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. ⁷ So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.*

Brothers and Sisters, our greatest strength in the church is when we unite around the common gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul said he was determined to know nothing among them, but Christ and Him crucified. This is the core of who we are. If we are truly united under the gospel of Jesus Christ, then we are truly united!

1. I believe Jesus died on the cross for my sins, was buried and raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).
2. I confess that Jesus Christ is the only Son of God (Acts 8:37).
3. I repent of my sinful ways. God is right and I am wrong (Acts 2:38).
4. I believe water baptism is when Jesus forgives me of my sins (Acts 22:16).
5. I am willing to live the rest of my days serving Christ.