

1. Paul's Ministry in Corinth (3Q 2026 1 and 2 Corinthians)

Biblical material: 1 Cor. 1:1, Gal. 1:1, Acts 17:16–34, 1 Cor. 5:9–11, Acts 18:4–10, 2 Cor. 2:4.

Quotes

- This city [Corinth] afforded too many temptations for the fun-loving Corinthian Christians. The Apostle Paul had seen many wondrous conversions. He wrote to them, calling them saints, for so they were in Christ. But, lacking spiritual discipline they were slipping back into the evils they faced each day. Corinth was a city in ancient Greece known as Vanity Fair. It was a city of Materialism, Antagonism, Competition, Selfishness, Hatred, Sexual immorality. *John Barnett*
- Corinth: Intellectually alert, materially prosperous, but morally corrupt. *Leon Morris*
- Corinth was one of the great cities of the ancient world, and a community very much like Southern California. It was prosperous, busy, and growing; it had a deserved reputation for the reckless pursuit of pleasure. Corinth had a rich ethnic mix, and it was a center for sports, government, military, and business... The Corinthian people were also world known: for partying, drunkenness, and loose sexual morals. The term *Korinthiazomai* was well known in the Roman Empire and it meant literally “to live like a Corinthian.” But everyone knew it really meant “to be sexually out of control.” *David Guzik*

Questions

Why did Paul change his approach between Athens and Corinth? What lessons are there in this for us today? In what ways was the city of Corinth similar/different to the world in which we live? What led to Paul deciding to “go to the foreigners”? What principles that we see here can we apply to our methods of sharing the gospel?

Bible summary

1 Corinthians 1:1 identifies Paul as the author, and Sosthenes as the “amanuensis,” or secretary. Galatians 1:1 similarly identifies Paul, with the comment that he was “an apostle not appointed by any human organization or human authority.” Acts 17:16–34 details Paul’s speech to the Athenians on the Areopagus. In 1 Corinthians 5:9–11 Paul says that in his previous letter to the church in Corinth that they shouldn’t associate with immoral people *in the church!* Acts 18:4–10 is an account of Paul’s first visit to Corinth. In his second letter (2 Corinthians 2:4) Paul states that “was crying many tears when I wrote to you, in great anguish and with a heavy heart—not to make you sad, but so you would know how much love I have for you.”

Comment

We last studied 1 and 2 Corinthians in 1998. Prior to that we looked at these two books in 1966. 1 Corinthians is not the first letter Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. He mentions in 1 Corinthians 5:9 a previous letter he sent them, which we do not have today. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus in the spring of AD 57.

Paul began the church in Corinth during his second missionary journey, and spent eighteen months working there (Acts 18:11). It was in Corinth that the rejection of Jesus as the Messiah by the Jews led him to announce that he would take the good news to the foreigners (Acts 18:6).

Corinth was a port city and major trading center with a reputation for lax morality and widespread sensuality. The Temple of Apollo was served by one thousand women who acted as religious prostitutes and provided the city with a significant income. It was against such a background that Paul presented the gospel, and his success is the more surprising in light of rampant decadence and paganism. Sometimes we make the argument that we live in very different circumstances to the early church, but Corinth is not much different to our pleasure-seeking secular world.

The reason for writing 1 Corinthians was to respond to the increasing disorder in the Corinthians church caused by a return by some to their former lifestyles, and to respond to the many questions of theological and practical consequence that members had raised in a letter to him. This latter point is very significant in interpreting 1 Corinthians, since Paul often quotes their words and then responds.

So what can we learn from Paul's first stay in Corinth? Most of the information is in Acts 18. Paul leaves Athens, having had limited success there, and travels to Corinth where he meets a Jew names Aquila and his wife Priscilla. He stays with them because they are in the same business as him, making tents. At some point they accept the good news and become Christians, and when Paul left for Ephesus they went with him, and were active missionaries (Acts 18:18, 26).

With the arrival of Silas and Timothy in Corinth, Paul becomes bolder and told the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. This the Jews rejected causing a major shift in Paul's approach. He announces he will now go to the foreigners. This had already begun to happen in his ministry, as is clear from the Jerusalem council of Acts 15. But here in Corinth Paul makes this his priority in the city. Instead of focusing on meeting with Jews in synagogues and so on, Paul actively approaches the foreigners, which eventually leads to the growth of the church with both Jews and foreigners.

Paul is successful in Corinth—even the synagogue leader and his family believe. The Lord encourages him, stating “many people in this city are mine.” Acts 18:10. The result? “Many of the people of Corinth who heard the message became believers and were baptized.” Acts 18:8.

It is perhaps surprising that Paul had greater success in the sinful city of Corinth than in the philosophical city of Athens. But there is an example for us today in seeing how the Lord can work despite what may seem to us to be major obstacles to the gospel.

Ellen White Comments

In Thessalonica, in Corinth, in Ephesus, and in other important centers, Paul and his companions in labor preached the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. But their chief energies were henceforth directed toward the building up of the kingdom of God in heathen territory, among peoples who had but little or no knowledge of the true God and of His Son. {AA 174}

In preaching the gospel in Corinth, the apostle followed a course different from that which had marked his labors at Athens. While in the latter place, he had sought to adapt his style to the character of his audience; he had met logic with logic, science with science, philosophy with philosophy. As he thought of the time thus spent, and realized that his teaching in Athens had been productive of but little fruit, he decided to follow another plan of labor in Corinth in his efforts to arrest the attention of the careless and the indifferent. He determined to avoid elaborate arguments and discussions, and “not to know anything” among the Corinthians “save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.” He would preach to them “not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.” 1 Corinthians 2:2, 4. {AA 244}

Paul's efforts in Corinth were not without fruit. Many turned from the worship of idols to serve the living God, and a large church was enrolled under the banner of Christ. {AA 252}

The first epistle to the Corinthian church was written by the apostle Paul during the latter part of his stay at Ephesus. For no others had he felt a deeper interest or put forth more untiring effort than for the believers in Corinth. For a year and a half he had labored among them, pointing them to a crucified and risen Saviour as the only means of salvation, and urging them to rely implicitly on the transforming power of His grace. Before accepting into church fellowship those who made a profession of Christianity, he had been careful to give them special instruction as to the privileges and duties of the Christian believer, and he had earnestly endeavored to help them to be faithful to their baptismal vows. Paul had a keen sense of the conflict which every soul must wage with the agencies of evil that are continually seeking to deceive and ensnare, and he had worked untiringly to strengthen and confirm those who were young in the faith. {AA 298-9}