

New Testament Survey:
Paul's Letters to the Corinthians

The New Testament contains 2 letters from St. Paul to the church at Corinth. Paul had founded this church on his second missionary journey.

The city of Corinth was situated on the isthmus connecting the Greek mainland to the Peloponnesus. Corinth had 2 ports: one on the Aegean Sea and one on the Gulf of Corinth facing the Adriatic Sea. The voyage around the Peloponnesus was a hazardous one that most captains avoided when possible. However, the ruler Periander (627-585 B.C.) had actually built a road (the Diolkos) between the ports for the purpose of transporting ships from one port to the other.

Corinth itself had an extremely wealthy city in classical Greek times. The Romans had destroyed the city in 146 B.C. for leading a Greek revolt against Rome. However, the site was far too strategic to abandon, so Julius Caesar re-founded Corinth in 44 B.C. The city quickly regained its wealth and prominence after its rebuilding.

Corinth boasted one of the greatest temples to Aphrodite in the ancient world. The temple was populated with 1,000 female prostitutes renowned for their beauty.

Given its ports and its patron deity of the goddess of love, Corinth was known throughout the Roman Empire as one of the most immoral cities of its day. The verb "korinthiazomai," literally "to act the Corinthian," meant to live immorally. This was the city in which Paul spent 18 months founding a church.

In some ways, Paul considered the Corinthian church to be one of his crowning moments. He spent much time and effort founding the church and then thought enough of its believers to remain actively involved with it for some time after he left.

Scholars believe these 2 letters are part of a series of letters to address the issues that arose after Paul's departure. Scholars believe the situation was resolved as follows:

1. a letter to which Paul refers in 1 Corinthians 5:9, ordering the Corinthians not to associate with any "sexually immoral" person in the church.
2. 1 Corinthians itself, written from Ephesus. This letter addresses many issues that Paul had learned plagued the church.
3. a "painful visit" when the Corinthians failed to solve the situation (2 Corinthians 2:1, 12:14, 13:1-2).
4. a "severe letter" sent by Paul via Titus to the church (2 Corinthians 2:3-9, 7:8-12).
5. 2 Corinthians itself, probably written from Macedonia.
6. Paul went to Corinth on his third missionary journey. Paul was residing in Corinth when he wrote Romans.

The letters to the Corinthians should give us hope today. The Church has always had problems with divisions and immorality. Paul's teachings on these issues should encourage his readers to realize the Church faces nothing today she hasn't faced in times past.

Outlines

Source: *Holman Bible Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1992).

1 Corinthians

- I. Introduction (1:1-9)
- II. Concerning divisions (1:10-3:4)
- III. Concerning leadership (3:5-4:21)
- IV. Concerning immorality (5:1-6:26)
- V. Concerning marriage (7:1-40)
- VI. Concerning food offered to idols (8:1-11:1)
- VII. Concerning orderly worship (11:2-34)
 - A. The order of Holy Communion (11:23-29)
- VIII. Concerning spiritual gifts (12:1-14:40)
 - A. Love, the greatest way (12:31b-13:13)
 - B. Teachings on the greatest gifts (chapter 14)
- IX. Concerning the resurrection (15:1-58)
- X. Concerning the collection and closing remarks (16:1-24)

2 Corinthians

- I. Introduction (1:1-2)
- II. Apostolic experience (1:3-11)
- III. Apostolic explanation (1:12-2:11)
- IV. Apostolic ministry (2:12-7:16)
- V. Apostolic fellowship (8:1-9:15)
- VI. Apostleship defended (10:1-13:14)