

#### D. Occasion for the Epistle

Paul spent a year and a half in Corinth during his first visit there. During that time the Lord raised up a significant community of believers in that area – a diverse group of people, but one unified in the gospel through Paul’s labors in a long and focused season of discipleship in Titius Justus’ home. The biblical text doesn’t explain Paul’s decision to move on, but Luke’s account in Acts indicates that he had determined to return to his home church in Antioch in Syria (18:18). Thus Paul headed east across the Aegean Sea toward Ephesus and, after spending some days with the disciples in that city, he set sail again, finally landing at Caesarea. And having visited the saints there, he made his way across Palestine until he arrived in Antioch (18:19-22).

Paul remained at Antioch for some time, but eventually determined to head out again in order to visit the churches that were the fruit of his previous missions work. This third journey into Asia Minor led him ultimately to Ephesus where he remained for three years (Acts 19:1ff). By the time Paul arrived, a disciple named Apollos had already sailed west to Achaia under the encouragement of Aquila and Priscilla and the Ephesian saints. (Priscilla and Aquila had departed Corinth with Paul and then remained on at Ephesus when Paul sailed for Caesarea. There they met and discipled Apollos, eventually sending him on to Corinth before Paul arrived back at Ephesus). *Though Paul had never even met Apollos, the Corinthians would thrust him into the middle of a controversy that pitted him against this younger counterpart.*

Under Aquila and Priscilla’s tutelage, Apollos became a mighty servant of Christ and the saints at Corinth found him to be a great blessing, especially as he withstood the Jews who continued in Paul’s absence to besiege the church and its gospel (Acts 18:24-28). Apollos was Christ’s gift to the Corinthian church, but they were unable to receive it: Their natural-mindedness would turn the Lord’s gift on its head, making Apollos a tool of division and discord rather than edification.

It was during this three-year period in Ephesus that Paul penned his first canonical Corinthian epistle (1 Corinthians 16:8-9), and a couple of things provoked that letter.

1. The immediate occasion for the letter was the arrival in Ephesus of a handful of saints from Corinth. These individuals were members (servants or family) of the household of a woman named Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11), and they evidently came to Paul in Ephesus seeking his counsel on various issues plaguing the Corinthian congregation. It’s uncertain whether they happened to be in Ephesus or had traveled to that city specifically to meet with Paul. Either way, they learned of his presence there and sought him out.
  - a. They informed Paul that serious discord and division had grown among the saints in Corinth. That dissension even involved *him* in the sense that members of the Corinthian church were setting him and Apollos (and other leading individuals) against each other as competing authority figures in the church (1:11-12, 3:1ff).
  - b. In addition, they apparently told Paul of other troublesome situations and practices among the Corinthian believers. Those included sexual immorality, legal conflicts, abuse of spiritual gifts and the Lord’s Table along with various doctrinal controversies, notably disputes regarding the resurrection of the dead.

2. The second reason for Paul's letter was his need to reply to a letter he'd received from the Corinthian church – probably brought by the three Corinthian brethren (16:17) – requesting his input on various issues they were facing (7:1). Their concerns had theological implications, but were more practical and personal in nature:

*Like every Christian individual and congregation, the Corinthian believers were having to grapple with what it means to honor and serve Christ and live a faithful Christian life in the context of their own culture and community.*

They couldn't help but bring personal and cultural presuppositions and ingrained patterns with them into their Christian lives, but that fact obligated them to recognize, understand and navigate through their convictions and conventions. Only in that way would they be able to approach life with the mind of Christ. Thus the Corinthians sought Paul's counsel on such issues as Christian marriage and sexuality, the intertwining of the idolatry industry and the marketplace in Corinth, and how the church is to approach its worship, especially with regard to spiritual gifts and the roles of men and women.

3. The third basis for the epistle was the growing tension between Paul and the Corinthians. This one was less overt, being overshadowed by the more pressing issues at hand.
  - a. To what extent Paul was aware of the changing sentiment in Corinth prior to the arrival of Chloe's people is unclear, but it's likely he'd gotten some sense of it from the church's letter – from its tone if not its content.
  - b. Moreover, Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus would have brought news of what was going on in with the Corinthian believers. Perhaps their visit preceded the one by the members of Chloe's household; perhaps it came afterwards. Either way, both groups would have expressed to Paul the same basic concerns in the church.
  - c. Finally, First Corinthians wasn't Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth (5:9). There is no extant record of that letter, but it proves that Paul had interaction with the Corinthians between his first visit and his first canonical letter. More importantly, it proves that he was aware of certain unholy trends in the church quite apart from the news brought by his two sets of visitors.

Through whatever various sources the information about Corinth came to Paul, it clearly caused him great concern. This beloved community among whom he'd labored as their father in the faith was facing challenges of sin and unbelief that, if not promptly and properly addressed, would tear the church apart, shipwreck the faith of its members, and destroy the church's testimony in the world. Paul realized he had to confront these matters head on, but he also knew there was only one way to bring true resolution, healing, and wholeness to the diseased Corinthian church: He had to apply the poultice and balm of the gospel.

*“In any case, the convergence of the secondary report [from the members of Chloe's house] with the Corinthians' own letter provoked Paul to compose an extended epistle taking up all these issues **and reframing them in light of his gospel proclamation.**” (Richard Hays)*

## E. Purpose for the Epistle

Paul regarded himself as the Corinthians' spiritual father; he loved them with a fierce and jealous devotion and this attitude is reflected in the tone and orientation of his letters to them. So it is that, while First Corinthians is very personal and affectionate, it is also direct and firm. Paul wasn't writing an informal social letter to the Corinthians, but a serious response to the various matters and concerns he'd become aware of. Some of those were raised by the Corinthians themselves in their letter to him; others reflected Paul's personal concerns based on reports he'd received and his own past interactions with them.

1. And so the obvious reason for writing First Corinthians was Paul's desire to respond to a series of specific issues that were confronting the personal and corporate life of the saints at Corinth. He understood that the Corinthians were struggling with and being threatened by very real problems and practices that needed to be addressed. Yet he also recognized that, in a certain sense, the troubles and challenges at Corinth were shared by all the churches, not only in the first century, but in every place and generation. This is because Christ's Church exists in this age in the state of *already but not yet*:
  - The saints share in Christ's life and mind by His indwelling, renewing and transforming Spirit, but His likeness as the Last Adam and Man of the Spirit is not yet fully formed in them (2 Corinthians 3:18).
  - They have been clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:26-27), but they must consciously and daily put on the new man created in His image and so live out His life in them (Ephesians 4:17-24; Galatians 2:20; cf. Colossians 3:1-3).

The Corinthians' struggle was, at bottom, the struggle to *be the Church*, but this is the core challenge that confronts every Christian body. Corinth's struggle was every church's struggle, and yet there were distinct and unique ways in which it manifested itself in the life of the Corinthian community. The challenge is the same for every church, but the practical dynamics are not. The reason is that no two churches are the same, and that is because no two people or communities or cultures are the same; each congregation has its own character and qualities, and so it was with Corinth.

2. Paul had spent a long time with the Corinthian saints and he knew them well. He was fully aware of the unique challenges they faced as a believing body residing in the city of Corinth and recognized that it would be neither appropriate nor helpful for him to speak to their concerns in broad generalities. He needed to address those things directly, but the way to do so was to put them into proper perspective; only then could they truly be remedied. Thus Paul's intention in writing went beyond providing pat answers and correctives to a list of practical concerns and sinful behaviors. He understood that the Corinthians' problems were merely symptomatic, and he was concerned to treat the systemic disease that was producing the symptoms.

***Paul wasn't interested in rectifying conduct and remedying problems as such, but in seeing the Corinthians grow up in Christ*** (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:1ff; Colossians 1:25-29).

- a. And so, while Paul's letter is deeply theological, it is not so in the sense that many might think. He didn't write as a theologian, but as a servant and minister of the gospel and undershepherd of the Chief Shepherd.
- Paul understood that he – like the Corinthians – was living in the “fullness of the times”: He recognized that the everlasting age of the eschaton has dawned and creational renewal and reconciliation – *life* – has come in the Living One, the risen and enthroned Christ who is the first fruits from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). Paul realized that the Christ event has changed everything forever, and that made it impossible for him to view anything in life through the eyes of the flesh – that is, according to the human paradigm of the old age and old order (2 Corinthians 5:14-17).
  - Paul treated the Corinthians' struggles biblically and theologically, but as he ought, in terms of *christology* and *eschatology* – that is, in terms of the inaugurated kingdom of God and what it means for those who've entered it and for their testimony – in life and word – to the world outside it.
- b. Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand that Christ's Church isn't another spiritual community organized around a particular set of doctrines and practices. It is the beginning of God's new creation, even as it shares in Christ's consummate, glorified life as the New Man. *The Church is His body (12:12ff) – the embodiment of His living presence in the world, and this means that the Church's struggle is the struggle of christiformity.*

The Church must be *holy*, but its holiness consists in its authentic and manifest Christ-likeness (cf. 1 Peter 1:14-16 with Ephesians 4:17-24). So the Church must *obey* its Lord, but its obedience consists in its integrity in conforming itself in every aspect of its existence to the life of Christ which both defines and animates it (2 Corinthians 10:1-5; cf. Galatians 5:1-7; also Romans 1:1-5, 16:25-26).

The Church is obligated to be the Church, but this necessitates that it first discern its true identity; an entity cannot conform itself to that which it does not recognize. From that starting point the Church can begin to understand how it is to order its life as a body and as Christ's witness to the world of men. Paul knew that, for the Corinthian church to be put straight, they would have to *repent*: They would have to look beyond their behavior to the ways and patterns of thinking which lay behind it. At bottom, all of the problems at Corinth were the result of natural-mindedness – of the “old man” interjecting and imposing his thoughts and conventions at both the individual and corporate levels.

Unlike so many shepherds (and Christians) in the Church today, Paul wasn't interested in the Corinthians reforming their behavior. But neither was he concerned to simply impart to them a more accurate doctrinal understanding. In themselves, correct doctrine and practice mean nothing; they are as much the domain of the old man as the new. What Paul sought for the Corinthians was a *renewed mind*; whatever the issue, challenge or problem, the saints at Corinth would find the remedy in their appropriation and application of the mind of Christ.