

# Corinth and the church



The Epistles to the Corinthians were written by the apostle Paul in the mid 50's A. D. These were letters written to a church community that, according to the book of Acts, Paul had a hand in founding on an earlier journey (Acts 18: 9). The epistles themselves speak much about the cultural, economic, and spiritual significance of this very heavily Roman influenced Greek city located on the Isthmus of Corinth. By examining the epistles and further historical source, the context and importance of first century Corinth will be explored. The city of Corinth as it is in the first century A. D. as founded as a Roman colony in 44 B. C. by the Emperor Julius Caesar. In just one century since it's re-founding, Corinth had become a very cosmopolitan city through its strategic location that was conducive for trade, its large and very multicultural population, and the favor it had in the region as a colony of the mighty Roman Empire. When Corinth was resettled, the Roman Empire populated it with a diverse cross section of the cultures contained within the empire at the time. Italians and Greeks would be the primary colonists along with Hellenized Jews, but also among the settlers were freed Judean slaves and other middle-easterners. Morris 18) This made for a melting pot of traditions, customs, and beliefs. And in conjunction with the economic promise of the city, this relative freedom and safety produced some interesting problems for the spiritual life of the Corinthian church that Paul was out to address in his epistles. Corinth was located strategically on an isthmus that happened to be nearly equidistant between Greece's other two major cities in the region, Sparta and Athens. In a stretch of less than five miles, this area contained a port on each side of the isthmus.

The eastern port had easily defended water access toward Asia Minor, south to northern Africa, and to the rest of the Mediterranean. The crucial port on the west of the isthmus had access to the Italian peninsula, the heart of the Roman Empire, and further west. (Constable) Even before the refounding of the city and the Hellenistic period, a paved trackway was constructed that allowed for cargo to be transported by dry land to the other side. (The location of first century Corinth added to its prominence in the Roman Empire, added to its wealth, and attracted people from all over the empire.

Paul states in 1 Corinthians 1: 26 that, " not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. " So it can be said that the majority of the church in Corinth was not of the upper class, although it is likely there are plenty of important figures in the cities' life that could be members of the church in Corinth. (Jongkind 139) In the book of Romans, also written by Paul (most probably written during his stay in Corinth), he mentions two likely wealthy people: Gaius, Paul's host, and Erastus, the treasurer of the city (Romans 16: 23). (Morris 21) Also, within the book of Acts, it is recorded that upon hearing Paul, many believed and were baptized, including Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue (Acts 18: 8). The diversity within the city was likely well represented in the demographics of the church. This diversity was deeper than just economic status. Within the city were members of the Imperial Cult, Jews, adherents to the philosophies of the day, and worshippers of the Greco/Roman gods, most predominantly Aphrodite.

This caused many tensions for Paul to address, like issues regarding food that had been sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 8), and unity and equality based in

faith and not in social status (2 Corinthians 8). First Century Corinth was not unlike the New York City of today, diverse, esteemed, wealthy, and alive.

## Works Cited

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