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*A one-year journey with the early church*



## Introduction to Dr. Tom Constable and His Bible Study (Expository) Notes

Dr. Constable is one of the most respected and beloved teachers of God's Word at Dallas Theological Seminary, and he has served as a Bible teacher and elder at Plano Bible Chapel for many years. Learn more about him at: [www.soniclight.com/constable/index.htm](http://www.soniclight.com/constable/index.htm). You can explore the rest of the Sonic Light website by left-clicking in the top lighthouse graphic to return to Sonic Light's homepage, or click on one of the tabs to see other pages:

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NOTES ON

## 1 CORINTHIANS

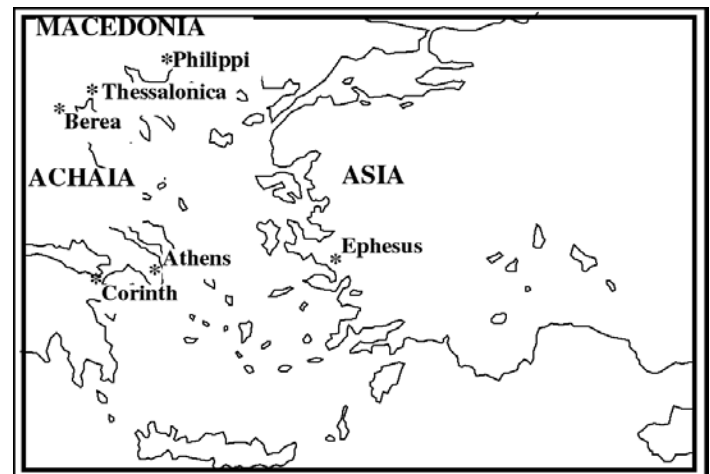
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DR. THOMAS L. CONSTABLE

### INTRODUCTION

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Corinth had a long history stretching back into the Bronze Age (before 1200 B.C.).<sup>1</sup> In Paul's day it was a Roman colony and the capital of the province of Achaia. The population consisted of Roman citizens who had migrated from Italy, native Greeks, Jews (Acts 18:4), and other people from various places who chose to settle there.



The ancient city of Corinth enjoyed an ideal situation as a commercial center. It stood just southwest of the Isthmus of Corinth, the land bridge that connected Northern Greece and Southern Greece, the Peloponnesus. This site made Corinth a crossroads for trade by land, north and south, as well as by sea, east and west. In Paul's day large ships would transfer their cargoes to land vehicles that would cart them from the Corinthian Gulf to the Saronic Gulf, or vice versa. There, stevedores would reload them onto other ships. If a ship was small enough, they would drag the whole vessel across the four and a half mile isthmus from one gulf to the other. This did away with the long voyage around the Peloponnesus. Later the Greeks cut a canal linking these two gulfs.<sup>2</sup>

Corinth's strategic location brought commerce and all that goes with it to its populace: wealth, a steady stream of travelers and merchants, and vice. In Paul's day many of the pagan religions included prostitution as part of the worship of their god or goddess. Consequently fornication flourished in Corinth.

"Old Corinth had gained such a reputation for sexual vice that Aristophanes (ca. 450-385 B.C.) coined the verb *korinthiazō* (= to act like a Corinthian, i.e., to commit fornication)."<sup>3</sup>

"The old city had been the most licentious city in Greece, and perhaps the most licentious city in the Empire."<sup>4</sup>

The most notorious shrine was the temple of Aphrodite that stood on top of an approximately 1,900 foot high mountain just south of the city, the Acrocorinthus. Hundreds of female slaves served the men who "worshipped" there.<sup>5</sup> Other major deities honored in Corinth included Melicertes, the patron of seafarers, and Poseidon, the sea god.

"All of this evidence together suggests that Paul's Corinth was at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world."<sup>6</sup>

There were several other local sites of importance to the student of 1 Corinthians. These included the *bema* (judgment seat or platform), the place where judges tried important cases, including Paul's (Acts 18:12).<sup>7</sup> Cenchrēa, the port of Corinth on the Saronic Gulf of the Aegean Sea, was the town from which Paul set sail for Ephesus during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:18). Isthmia was another little town east of Corinth, just north of Cenchrēa, that hosted the Isthmian Games every two or three years. These athletic contests were important in the life of the Greeks, and Paul referred to them in this epistle (9:24-27).

Paul had arrived in Corinth first from Athens, which lay to the east. In Corinth he preached the gospel and planted a church. There, too, he met Priscilla and Aquila, Jews who had recently left Rome. After local Jewish officials expelled the church from the synagogue, it met in a large house next

door that Titius Justus owned. Paul ministered in Corinth for 18 months, probably in A.D. 51 and 52. He left taking Priscilla and Aquila with him to Ephesus. Paul then proceeded on to Syrian Antioch by way of Caesarea.

Returning to Ephesus on his third journey Paul made that city his base of operations for almost three years (A.D. 53-56). There he heard disquieting news about immorality in the Corinthian church. Therefore he wrote a letter urging the believers not to tolerate such conduct in their midst. Paul referred to this letter as his "former letter" (1 Cor. 5:9). It is not extant today.

Then he heard from "Chloe's people" that factions had developed in the church (1:11). He also received a letter from the church in Corinth requesting his guidance in certain matters (7:1). These matters were marriage, divorce, food offered to idols, the exercise of spiritual gifts in the church, and the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem. Those who carried this letter also reported other disturbing conditions in the church (5:1; 16:17). These conditions were the condoning rather than disciplining of immorality, Christians suing one another in the pagan courts, and disorders in their church meetings. These factors led Paul to compose another letter, "1 Corinthians." In it he dealt with the problem of factions, promised to visit them soon, and said he was sending Timothy to Corinth (chs. 1-4). Paul added his responses to the Corinthians' questions to what he had already written. He dealt next with the oral reports (chs. 5-6) and then with the questions that the Corinthian believers had written to him (chs. 7-16). He evidently sent this epistle from Ephesus by trusted messengers in the late winter or early spring of A.D. 56 (cf. 16:8).

It seems that a conflict had developed between the Corinthian church and its founder, Paul. There was internal strife in the church, as the epistle makes clear. However the larger problem seems to have been that some in the community were leading the church into a view of things that was contrary to that of Paul. This resulted in a questioning of Paul's authority and his gospel (cf. Gal.). The key issue between Paul and the Corinthians was what it means to be "spiritual."<sup>8</sup>

"It [1 Corinthians] is not the fullest and clearest statement of Paul's Gospel; for this we must turn to Romans. Nor is it the letter that shows Paul's own heart most clearly, for in this respect it is surpassed by 2 Corinthians, and perhaps by other epistles too. But it has the great value of showing theology at work, theology being used as it was intended to be used, in the criticism and establishing of persons, institutions, practices, and ideas."<sup>9</sup>

"If in Romans Paul resembles the modern professor of Biblical Theology, in 1 Corinthians he resembles the pastor-teacher, faced with the care of the church on the firing line of Christian warfare."<sup>10</sup>

## PAUL'S CORINTHIAN CONTACTS

Paul's founding visit	His "former letter"	The Corinthians' letter to him	<b>First Corinthians</b>	Paul's "painful visit"	His "severe letter"	<b>Second Corinthians</b>	Paul's anticipated visit
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### FOOTNOTES

- 1** See W. Harold Mare, "1 Corinthians," in *Romans-Galatians*, vol 10 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 175-76, for information helpful to most expositors.
- 2** Nero began this canal, but it was finally completed in 1893. C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 1.
- 3** Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 2. See also David K. Lowery, "1 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, p. 505, for other quotations about Corinth from ancient writers.
- 4** Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, p. xii.
- 5** The Greek geographer Strabo wrote of 1,000 prostitutes, but this probably referred to the early history of the old city, and it may have been an exaggeration. See Fee, pp. 2-3.
- 6** *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 7** See the diagram of central Corinth in Mare, p. 186.
- 8** See Fee, pp. 4-15.
- 9** Barrett, p. 26.
- 10** S. L. Johnson Jr., "The First Epistle to the Corinthians," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1229.