

Background notes

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The Ancient City of Corinth

Geography and Population: Ancient Corinth was situated on a narrow *isthmus* (a strip of land connecting two larger areas with water on either side) linking northern and southern Achaia (modern day Greece). Corinth was the largest city that Paul had encountered with a population of around 250,000 people.

Importance: Corinth was an important center of trade and commerce flanked by two seaports on either side of the isthmus. Ships, instead of sailing the treacherous waters around the southern part of Achaia, would unload their cargo and march 200 miles across the isthmus. Corinth also held the Isthmian Games, which were second in importance only to the Olympic Games.

Culture: Corinth's commercial prosperity created a melting pot of culture, language, and religion. As such, Corinth was deeply beset by pagan idolatry and philosophy. A number of prominent temples dedicated to Greek deities were in Corinth, the most important being the temples of Aphrodite (goddess of love), Apollo (god of the sun and music), and Asklepios (god of healing). Sexual immorality was pervasive throughout Corinth's temples and its port-city life.

Paul in Corinth

Paul was in Corinth for about a year and half (from c.50 AD), before journeying on to Ephesus on his third missionary journey (c.52-57 AD). It was in Ephesus that Paul began to hear word of problems arising in the Corinthian church and consequently wrote them a series of letters. 1 Corinthians (c.54 AD) is the first of two *canonical* letters written to the church in Corinth.

The Church in Corinth

After Paul left Corinth, a number of problems emerged in the Church. Failure to distinguish between worldly and Godly wisdom led to divisions, and Paul's authority as an apostle was questioned. Doubts arose concerning the resurrection of Christ and the future resurrection of the dead. This led to worldliness, individualism and a pre-occupation with spiritual gifts among the Corinthian Christians. Numerous public scandals: sexual immorality, law suits

amongst believers, factions in the Lord's Supper, and chaos in meetings, marred the reputation of the Church. The Corinthian believers were called to be a holy people. Instead, they acted like the world around them, and at times did worse! Paul addresses all these issues in 1 Corinthians, reminding the church that they have been 'sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people' (1 Corinthians 1:2b).

In a Nutshell... Paul urges the Corinthian church to put away division, immorality, worldliness and disorder. Instead, they should strive for unity by building each other up, remembering that both the individual and the church is the dwelling place of God's Spirit.

How these sample studies work

- The first couple of questions in *Getting started* raise some general issues to think about.
- *Observation* is about getting the detail – reading the passage and seeing what it is about. *Interpretation* aims to take you to some issues in and behind the passage – to help us to think at a little more depth. Sometimes *Observation* and *Interpretation* are combined in the form of interviews, role plays, questions, charts, etc.
- *Implications* seeks to help us think about applying this section of Scripture.
- Each study finishes with suggestions for prayer.

For Your Information will provide a little background to some verses with some additional references to look up from time to time. There will also occasionally be a section called **Did You Notice?** which will also make some comments on various verses and themes.