The Setting of 1 Corinthians

Author:

The apostle Paul is explicitly named as the author of 1 Corinthians in the first word of the letter.

There is no good reason to doubt this. The theological concerns of the letter, the energy of its style, its vocabulary, and its historical connections with the other Pauline letters and Acts mark it as Pauline. The traditional title of the letter means that it is the first of two canonical letters by Paul to the Corinthians, not that it was Paul’s first letter to them (see 5:9).

Date Written:

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from the city of Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia (16:8, 19) sometime before the final day of Pentecost (16:8; cf. Lev. 23:11, 15), and therefore in the spring. It is unclear whether this was the spring of AD 53, 54, or 55. He wrote, in any case, near the end of his three-year ministry in Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:5–9; cf. Acts 19:21–22). Both Corinth and Ephesus were wealthy port cities steeped in pagan idolatry and philosophy. Corinth benefited both militarily and economically from its strategic location at one end of the isthmus that connected the southern Greek peninsula to the mainland.

Literary Genre:

1 Corinthians is an epistle (letter) written in Koine Greek.

Literary Style:

This is a pastoral letter and was written in Paul’s typical style. It is similar to Paul’s other letters to congregations in the early church.

Like other New Testament Epistles, it is an “occasional” letter, and one can quite readily piece together the things that occasioned 1 Corinthians by noting signals in the text. The letter is highly relevant today, as it deals with such issues as the relationship between Christians and their surrounding pagan culture, divisions within the church, the ordering of church practices such as the Lord’s Supper, and the use of spiritual gifts. The letter also deals with matters of personal morality, such as sex, marriage, celibacy, and the virtues (especially love).

First Corinthians follows the form of a typical first-century epistle, though its content is governed by the specific situation in the Corinthian church. For example, the usual epistolary elements of salutation, thanksgiving, and paraenesis (set of moral exhortations) receive scant treatment. The body of the letter is taken up with situations and questions from the Corinthian church that Paul addresses, and the epistolary close (chapter 16) is extensive because of business Paul has with the church. The rhetorical modes of exhortation and instruction dominate the letter. Chapter 13 is an encomium (a written tribute) in praise of love.
The book makes extensive use of rhetorical techniques such as contrast, repetition, and analogy. It draws sharp contrasts between truth and error, and between moral good and evil. Because Paul regards the Corinthian Christians as being out of line in a number of areas, the letter exhibits a strong corrective tone.

**Audience and Destination:**

Paul wrote to Christians in Corinth, a large commercial city with around 500,000 people that was the capital of Achaia. It was very religious and very immoral. Silas, Timothy, Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos helped Paul establish the church.

Corinth sat on the isthmus connecting the Greek mainland with the Peloponnesian peninsula. This location made it a flourishing crossroads for sea traffic between the Aegean region and the western Mediterranean. It was a place where many cultures and religions mingled. Since it was a Roman colony, Roman law and customs were important, particularly among the upper classes, but “many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’” found a home in Corinth (8:5). The worship of these gods was fully integrated into governmental affairs, civic festivals, trade guilds, and social clubs, and everyday life in general. Corinth was also a destination for traveling professional orators who charged a fee for attendance at their entertaining rhetorical displays and advised people on how to advance socially.

Into this milieu Paul brought the gospel of Jesus Christ, and soon a church was established. He was aided in his work by two new-found friends from Rome, Priscilla and Aquila, who, like Paul, were displaced Jews and tentmakers by trade (Acts 18:1–4, 18–19, 24–28; Rom. 16:3; 2 Tim. 4:19). Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila spent 18 months in Corinth in the early 50s and then, after a brief trip to Judea and Syria, Paul traveled to Ephesus. Priscilla and Aquila were already there (Acts 18:19; 1 Cor. 16:19) and, by the time Paul arrived, they had already met the skillful Christian apologist Apollos, who had also been in Corinth (Acts 18:24–19:1; 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4–6, 22; 4:6; 16:12).

The Acrocorinth is a small but steep mountain 1,886 feet (575 m) high on the Peloponnesian peninsula in southern Greece. Ancient Corinth was built at the mountain’s foot, benefiting also from the natural spring that provided water for the town. In Paul’s day Corinth, though a couple of miles inland, oversaw the territory connecting the Adriatic port of Lechaion on the west with the Aegean port of Cenchreae to the east (see Acts 18:18). Ships were often portaged between these seaports across this narrow stretch of the Peloponnesian isthmus, approximately 3.7 miles (6 km) wide at its narrowest. Several rulers in the first century a.d. foolishly attempted to construct a canal across the isthmus, but this was not successfully accomplished until the nineteenth century.

The famed Greek city of Corinth, renowned for its artistry in bronze, its wealth, and its wanton sexuality, was destroyed in 146 BC during a war with Rome. The city was re-founded as a Roman colony in 44 BC by Roman freedmen, and the distinct archaeological strata in the city center testify to this gap in its history. Inscriptions from the first hundred years of the new colony were mostly in Latin, although strong marks of Greek culture were also evident in the art and life of the city.

First-century Corinth followed a Roman city plan based on a rectangular grid. Typical urban structures were built (or reconstructed), such as shops, stoas, basilicas, a bouleuterion (for the city council meetings), a
gymnasium, baths, latrines, and a theater. A few large houses from this period have also been excavated. The center of town boasted the refashioned Peirene Fountain as a pleasant place from which to draw spring water. To this day a raised speaker’s platform stands in the main forum, and a nearby inscription refers to this platform as the *rostra* (equivalent to a bêma or tribunal); this is probably the very location where Gallio judged Paul to be innocent (Acts 18:12–17). Some other significant archaeological remains date from post-NT times, such as the odeion (a small covered theater). In Paul’s day the great Doric-style temple (to Athena or Apollo) from the sixth century BC remained a central feature in Corinth, and multiple temples to other deities dotted the city.

**Occasion:**

Paul settled in Ephesus for three years (Acts 20:31) and at some point wrote to the Corinthians the otherwise unknown letter that he mentions in 1 Corinthians 5:9. It is not known what prompted the letter but it dealt with sexual immorality, a persistent problem for the Corinthian church (5:1–13; 6:12–20). Sometime later, Paul received an oral report indicating that the Corinthians had not only misunderstood his first letter (5:10)
but were plagued with serious problems of division, sexual immorality, and social snobbery (1:10; 5:1; 11:18). Around the same time, a letter arrived from the Corinthians that displayed considerable theological confusion about marriage, divorce, participation in pagan religions, order within corporate worship, and the bodily resurrection of Christians (7:1; 8:1; 12:1; 15:12, 35).

In short, Paul’s ministry in Corinth had resulted in a well-established thriving congregation. He had moved on to Ephesus and wrote to Corinth because:

1) They misunderstood a now lost letter Paul wrote advising them not to associate with people claiming to be Christians but lived immorally.
2) Paul heard from Chloe the church had divided into competing factions.
3) Paul learned they tolerated sexual immorality.
4) Paul received information about the church and questions from them.

**Purpose:**

In response to these troubling developments mentioned above (see Audience & Destination and Occasion), Paul felt compelled to write a substantial letter to Corinth, making the case that much of their conduct was out of step with the gospel. At the root of their disunity lay an arrogance (3:21; 4:6, 8, 18–19; 5:2, 6) that was incompatible with God’s free gifts to them in Christ: wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1:30; 4:7). In addition, a self-centered insistence on their own rights (6:12; 8:9; 9:12; 10:23) at the expense of the weak (8:10; 11:22) and marginalized (14:16, 23) revealed that their own social advancement rather than the gospel’s advancement was their top priority.

At the root of much of the immorality and idolatry in Corinth, moreover, lay a lack of appreciation for the holiness that God requires of his people. Though the particulars of the Mosaic law were no longer to define the boundaries for God’s people (7:19), the law’s underlying theme that God’s people were to be “set apart”—a people marked off from their culture—remained in place (5:1–2, 13; 7:19; 10:1–5). In addition, the dwelling of God’s Spirit within each believer (6:19) and the new unity that believers have with the resurrected, living Christ (6:14–17; 15:30–34) implied that the Corinthians needed to make a clean break from the moral impurity of their culture.

Despite the often stern tone of the letter (4:18–21; 5:2; 11:17, 22; 15:36), Paul was thankful to God for the Corinthians (1:8) and felt a deep personal affection for them (16:24). Because of this love, and for the purpose of God’s glory (10:31), Paul wanted the Corinthians to become a well-constructed dwelling place for God’s Spirit (3:12, 16) and to be “guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:8).