

"Corinth"

(Robbie Fox Castleman)

Corinth is located about fifty miles west of Athens, Greece, on the northern side of the Peloponnesus. Corinth is situated on a four-and-a-half-mile-long isthmus between two harbors and is an international crossroads between the western Mediterranean and Asia. The ancient site of "Old Corinth" is situated a little over three miles from the center of the modern commercial city, which was partially destroyed by an earthquake in 1858. Excavations begun after the quake have uncovered a wall that runs six miles around the site of the ancient city.

Corinth was a Greek city-state before the fifth century BC and a leading center of commerce before its conquest by Rome in 146 BC. The city was not rebuilt for a century, but it was eventually repopulated by ambitious and competitive freedmen from Rome, whose social status was just above that of a Roman slave. In the first century BC, during the reign of Julius Caesar, the city made a significant shift toward its development as a Roman colony. Excavations have revealed the use of Latin coins dating from 44 BC, and the practice of civil religion no longer focused on the Greek gods but on the emerging emperor worship of the Romans.

A century later, when Paul lived in Corinth for eighteen months, Greek was still the official language, but the inscriptions and names of those in the city were predominantly Latin. Eight of the seventeen Corinthian Christians named by Paul in the New Testament have Roman names. Indeed, slaves outnumbered free citizens within the city two to one, and this also is an indication of the new wealth that was created in Rome's new Corinthian colony. The aristocracy of the "new" Corinth reflected the ambition and independence of the "newly rich." The elite of the city identified with Rome, but Greek influence still prevailed in much of the city's culture. Corinth was the host city for the Panhellenic games, athletic events second only to the Olympics of Athens' fame.

However, like any urban city today, there was a wide disparity between the haves and have-nots, and the turmoil this often creates is clearly reflected in Paul's concern regarding the unity of the church and its witness to the city at large. Most Corinthian Christians were not wealthy (1 Cor. 1:26) and many were slaves (1 Cor. 7:20–24), but social conflict over status does appear to have been an issue in the Corinthian church. The independent, competitive spirit that had rebuilt the city was alive and well in the Christian faith community. It is evident in Paul's letters that Corinthian Christians would compete over anything, even which spiritual gift was superior to another!

The church of Corinth also reflected similar conflicts and problems that are still common today in any large harbor city with a culturally and socially diverse population and booming business. Corinth was a cauldron in which a broad religious pluralism mixed with crime, sexual promiscuity, and a variety of entertainment options. Five years before Paul founded the church during his second missionary journey, a 14,000-seat theater was renovated. And although the official practice of the empire's civil religion didn't require belief in any particular god, there were at least twenty-six sacred places and sanctuaries. The most popular sites were sanctuaries devoted to Asclepius, Athena, and Aphrodite.



Scholars differ on the extent of Corinth's reputation as a place for all sorts of sexual practices and pleasures. It is known that the temple of Aphrodite used many temple slaves as prostitutes. Ancient writers commented on the sexually promiscuous atmosphere of Corinth, some with a tone of condemnation and some with a measure of appreciation, promotion, and even humor. Prostitution was viewed as part of the city's trade and commerce. The sexual behavior of male gentiles would obviously come into conflict with the standards of monogamous purity mandated by Judaism. The influx of Jews from Rome to Corinth just before the founding of the church would certainly have heightened religious and social tensions within the city. This same tension and conflict within the church community seems to be a significant concern to Paul.

The apostle Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half (Acts 18:11) and was joined by a Jewish Christian couple who were exiles from Rome, Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:2). To say the least, Corinth was a challenging place for church planting. Not only did the pagan nature of the city make discipleship particularly difficult, but the Jewish population of the city notably resisted the establishment of the church, which they saw as an aberrant sect of Judaism. The volatile temperament of the city and its citizens is reflected clearly in Luke's account of Paul's appearance before the legal tribunal (Acts 18:12–17). Two archaeological discoveries in the excavation of old Corinth are of notable interest to readers of the New Testament. The first is the discovery of the bema as the site of the tribunal mentioned above. Situated in the marketplace, the bema was the place where Roman officials stood to make public appearances, including the rendering of legal judgments. The second archaeological find underscores the strong connection between the cities and Christians of both Corinth and Rome.

Paul wrote his letter to the Romans while staying in Corinth, and in the conclusion of that epistle the apostle includes a list of his own greetings to Roman Christians and greetings from Corinthian Christians who are acquainted with believers in Rome (Rom. 16:1–24). Erastus, the city treasurer (16:23), is one Corinthian Christian included in this section of Paul's letter to the Romans. On April 15, 1929, a stone was excavated at the northeast corner of the theater in Corinth. Studies have concluded the pavement surrounding the stone was laid in about AD 50, just before the time of Paul's visit and the founding of the Corinthian church. The Latin inscription on the stone translates as "Erastus in return for his aedileship laid [the pavement] at his own expense." In the Roman Empire an aedile was a person associated in some way with buildings, roads, sanitation, public games, and the like. The Greek word Paul uses to identify Erastus as the "city treasurer" is an appropriate word to describe this Roman official. In addition, the likelihood that the Erastus in Paul's letter is the Erastus carved into the stone is heightened in that the name is very uncommon and is not found in any Corinthian records other than in this stone and in Romans 16:23.