

Paul in Corinth

Acts 18:1–22. Twenty minutes on a Sunday morning is nowhere near enough to even begin to look at Paul's ministry in Corinth and the birth of the church there, so here are some notes and references to help you explore more. Even these are really only the very tip of the iceberg!

The people involved:–

Paul, an apostle, from Tarsus in Turkey, now based in Antioch;

Silas and Timothy, Paul's companions, from Antioch and Lystra;

Priscilla and Aquila, a couple of Jewish believers from Rome, and

the Corinthian believers, a good mix of Jews and Greeks.

We probably know more about **Paul's work and relationship with the believers in Corinth** than about any of his other contacts. The two letters he wrote to them reveal much about them – and him!

Just looking at **Acts 18**, we would get little hint of Paul's state of mind, but **1 Corinthians 2:3** reveals that he was very conscious of his own weakness, even admitting to 'fear' and 'much trembling'. Not so surprising, then, that the Lord speaks to him in **Acts 18:9-10**, telling him not to be afraid, perhaps even to **stop** being afraid!

Although Luke reports him as 'reasoning' and 'trying to persuade' as he speaks in the synagogue each week, his own awareness is that mere man-made logic and persuasion is worthless, and would give a false foundation for faith. The whole of **1 Corinthians 2** gives us an insight into how Paul sees the Holy Spirit working. He is convinced of the need for the Spirit of God to reveal 'the things freely given to us by God' (**2:12**). An echo of Jesus' own words in **John 16:12-15**.

One of the results of this conviction is that Paul insists that the believers at Corinth are not 'his' in any way. From **1 Corinthians 1:10** to **1:31**, he underlines that it is God who has been (and still is) at work in them. He seems to have been aware of the danger of personal loyalty (and therefore divisions) from a very early point in his work at Corinth, and so baptised very few of them himself. On the other hand, he takes seriously his own responsibilities towards them, and aspects of this show through his letters to them. See **1 Corinthians 4:12-17**, **2 Corinthians 11:2-3**, **12:14-18** for just a few examples.

He also insists that his message is 'foolishness' in the eyes and ears of the world (**1 Corinthians 1:18**). Paul was well schooled in logic, expert in the Jewish law and well able to hold his own in any debate. He puts all these abilities aside, not because he cannot achieve, but because he has seen that **God doesn't work that way**. Back in **Acts 18**, he tries every way he can find to show the Jews and Greeks in the synagogue that Jesus is the promised

Messiah but, when it is evident that they have decided to reject the message, he doesn't try to 'twist their arms'. Instead he emphasises to them that, by their resistance, they have taken the responsibility for their own standing before God.

We may often think of **Silas & Timothy** as Paul's trainees, but he certainly felt his need of them in Corinth. It seems to have been only after their arrival from Macedonia that there were any real results. Paul changed up a gear from working to earn his living, and now was able to give all his time to proclaiming the message of Jesus. **2 Corinthians 11:7-9** indicates that the reasons may have been financial – he would probably have preferred to spend all his time proclaiming the gospel from the start but simply didn't have the resources until they brought them, so he was not ashamed to work with his hands to support himself. Tent-making meant hard work, and it was a very ordinary job. No wonder he writes about 'humbling' himself! He seems to have done this often, e.g. at Ephesus (**Acts 20:33-35**).

But there was more to Silas and Timothy than the fact that they brought gifts from the Macedonian churches for Paul's support!

Silas was a prophet and a prominent member of the church in Jerusalem, and selected as a member of the delegation sent to Antioch in **Acts 15**, to accompany Paul and Barnabas and 'back up' the letter from Jerusalem. He evidently stayed in Antioch while Paul and Barnabas (and 'many others also' – including Silas maybe?) taught and preached there (**Acts 15: 30-35**). An excellent way for Silas and Paul to get to know each other and learn to value each other's ministry. Silas may have been from Jerusalem originally, but he became very involved with Antioch. They seem to have endorsed Paul's choice of him, too (**Acts 15:40-41**).

Timothy, by contrast, was young and inexperienced when Paul first met him, not an established church leader like Silas. Again, it is Paul's choice that decides Timothy's membership of the travelling group (**Acts 16:1-3**). He seems to have been fairly inactive initially, as it was Paul and Silas who were imprisoned in Philippi, blamed for the disturbances there, and hastily moved on from Thessalonica when trouble loomed there as well. He was definitely there, though, as he stayed in Berea with Silas when Paul was moved on again! (**Acts 16 & 17**).

He will have benefited from working with Silas in Berea, as well as with both Paul and Silas in Corinth, and it is not long before he is trusted to travel into Macedonia with Erastus, at probably about the same time as Paul writes to Corinth (**Acts 19:21-22, 1 Corinthians 16:5-11**). Paul wants to make sure that the Corinthians regard him as a worker doing the same work as Paul himself, not just as his assistant. Paul can see that Timothy has quickly

caught the same clear vision of the church and is working with him like a son in the family business (**1 Corinthians 4:14-17, Philipians 2:19-20**).

These two are key apostolic partners with Paul. They share with him in his ministry in Corinth and elsewhere (**2 Corinthians 1:19**) and in writing many of his letters.

Priscilla & Aquila are a great couple and completely different. Maybe Paul did first meet them out of his necessity to earn money, but they come to be valued and loved by him, and by many Christians in different places. They are not apostles. They are always 'locals' who join in with what God is doing, wherever they happen to live at the time. In Corinth, they become Paul's hosts and their home is probably an open house to many believers (**Acts 18:1-3**). Then they travel with Paul to Ephesus, where they stay for a while and play an important part by putting Apollos on the right lines and helping to encourage his ministry (**Acts 18:18-19, 24-28**).

They are probably still there when Paul visits again and writes to the Corinthian church (**1 Corinthians 16:19**) and – guess what – they are already hosts to the church there! When they return to Rome, they do the same there (**Romans 16:3-5**), but it seems that they eventually go back to Ephesus (**1 Timothy 4:19**). Timothy will have valued their presence!

Somewhere along the line, they risk their lives for Paul, maybe during that first time in Corinth. Like Paul, they are Jews who are able to communicate with Jew and Gentile alike. There is never any indication that they 'go full-time' or do anything but just go on working as tentmakers, talking to people as they can and welcoming the church to their home. Paul says that all the 'churches of the Gentiles' give them their thanks. 'Ordinary' people – extraordinary results!

The Corinthian Believers. They were a real mixture, Jews and Greeks – Corinth was a key commercial hub of the time. The Jews were very integrated in the local culture – they had Roman and Greek names like Gaius, Crispus and Sosthenes. There were non-Jewish 'worshippers of God' too, basically Gentiles who had converted to Judaism (**Acts 18:4,7**). It seems like it was a pretty active synagogue even before Paul got there! Although the Jews gave Paul a hard time, both Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his successor Sosthenes became believers, and Paul's public teaching (next door to the synagogue!) continued for 18 months, much longer than Paul usually spent in one place.

This mixture may have been one of the causes of the divisions that sprang up in Corinth after Paul left. We know that Apollos went to Corinth soon after Paul (**Acts 18:24-19:1**). As one of the factions in Corinth claimed allegiance to Cephas (Peter), we can fairly safely assume that either Peter himself visited, or some who thought they represented him. Two of the ironies

of this disunity are that 1) Paul and Silas had only met as a result of resolving the 'Gentile question' with Peter and the others in Jerusalem in **Acts 15**, and 2) it was Aquila and Priscilla (right on Paul's wavelength) who had so much helped Apollos in his life and ministry. Certainly no basis for disunity!

It was these three names that different groups took, claiming to follow Paul, Apollos or Peter. The super-spiritual ones said that they, on the other hand, followed Christ. If only they had said, 'We all follow Christ', Paul's words in **1 Corinthians 1:10-17** might not have been necessary.

After the initial greeting of the letter, he makes this issue of disunity in the church his top priority, and tackles it by going back to the basis of the good news he had brought them in the first place – that it is by God's own doing that they are in Christ (**1 Corinthians 1:30-31**). They could not boast about their own achievement in coming to Christ, nor of the achievement of any human being.

Paul is so concerned about this problem that he continues dealing with it right to the end of **1 Corinthians 3**. There are issues of immorality, lawsuits in the church, sacrifices to idols, order in the church, the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts and resurrection to deal with, but he homes straight in on division. It strikes right at the heart of the foundation he has laid.

There in the synagogue, and then in Titius Justus' house next door, he had proclaimed the good news of Jesus to Jews and Gentiles alike. The terms of his greeting to them in **1 Corinthians 1:1-9** show that they were all on a level footing with each other and with every other believer wherever they lived.

Corinth was a great cosmopolitan Greek city, a Roman colony and a commercial centre, with widespread immorality and a variety of cultures and religions. To be a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ cut right across all distinctions of background and tradition, and Paul saw that this standing was threatened by division. As we read on through **1 Corinthians**, the same theme of unity comes out in many other aspects:– lawsuits, idol sacrifices, liberty, the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts and the body of Christ.

In this great city, Paul expected the believers to be united. It was essential for the life and growth of the church. We may be quick to condemn the Corinthian church, but our own situation is probably worse. At least, with their divisions, they still regarded themselves as one church in the whole city. We can hardly claim that, even in our villages! We may not know the answer, but it would be a start if we began to acknowledge the problem and the priority that the Lord still attaches to it.

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