

# INTRODUCTION TO 46<sup>TH</sup> BIBLEBOOK

## THE FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS (A.D. 54)

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### A. CORINTH AND THE CORINTHIANS.

#### **1. The city of Corinth.**

In ancient times, Corinth was notorious for her gross immorality, especially the worship of the female idol called 'Venus', a Roman goddess, whose functions encompassed love, beauty, desire, sex, fertility, prosperity and victory. In Roman mythology, she was the ancestor of the Roman people through her son, Aeneas, who survived the fall of Troy and fled to Italy. Her Greek counterpart is called *Aphrodite* Pandemos (literally: "of all the people"). Her temple had more than a thousand temple prostitutes! The Romans destroyed the city in 146 B.C., but the Roman emperor, Julius Caesar, rebuilt the city in 46 B.C. and claimed her as his ancestor.

*Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia to which nearly all of Greece and Macedonia belonged.* The city was the residence of the Roman proconsul, that is, governor. While *Athens was the centre of wisdom and science, Corinth was the centre of political administration, commerce and social life of Achaia.* Corinth was the most important city in Achaia, because she lay at the cross-roads of the most important trade routes from east to west and from north to south. It was an important international trade city and had a harbour on both sides of its neck of land, which connected the southern Peloponnesus with the northern mainland of Greece. Small ships were dragged across this neck of land from the one sea to the other sea, but passengers and goods of large ships in one sea had to be loaded over into large ships in the other sea. Only after the time of emperor Nero, a channel was dug to connect the two seas.

Along the southern end of the neck of land there was a mountain ridge running from east to west which blocked the entrance to the Peloponnesus. The city of Corinth was situated on the slope of this mountain ridge which rose from the plain to the Acro-Corinthos, a 550 meters high rocky mountain. The ruins of buildings can still be seen today.

#### **2. The citizens of Corinth.**

Corinth was a Roman colony. Many Romans lived there. They were Roman governing officials, Roman merchants and Roman descendants of the early colonists. Note the Roman names of people at Corinth<sup>1</sup>. The Romans formed the local aristocracy. The majority of citizens however were Greeks. There was also a large Jewish community (1:22-25; 7:18-19; 9:20-21; 10:32; 12:13). The Jews even had their own synagogue<sup>2</sup> and had kept their religious beliefs and a strong moral standard.

#### **3. The cultural and social life of Corinth.**

Corinth was the most important city of all Greece in Paul's day. It was a city of culture and art. The city abounded in studios of language and schools of philosophy. However, materialism, amusement and public immorality were rampant in the city. Corinth attracted great crowds of foreigners from the east and the west. Their gods were gods of perverse pleasure and lust. It was the centre of a debased form of the worship of Venus. The most characteristic sins of the citizens of Corinth were sexual immorality, drunkenness and licentiousness (15:32-34).

#### **4. The church in Corinth.**

The first letter to the Corinthians begins with the words, "the church of God in Corinth" (1:2). The majority of the church members were Greeks and Romans (12:2). Some of them had emerged from the gross sexual immorality, idolatry and corruption, which characterised the city of Corinth (6:9-11; 8:7). Some of the most prominent Jews joined Paul (9:20)<sup>3</sup> and that led to tension between the Jews and Christians and even a plot against Paul<sup>4</sup>. However, the majority of church members belonged to the ordinary and poorer people. 1 Corinthians 1:26 reveals that not many of the church members were wise, influential or of noble birth by human standards. Nevertheless, some church members were rich, prominent and influential, as for example Crispus, the synagogue ruler (1:14)<sup>5</sup> and probably Erastus, the city's director of public works<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 18:7-8; Romans 16:21-23; 1 Corinthians 16:17

<sup>2</sup> Acts 18:4

<sup>3</sup> Acts 18:4,8

<sup>4</sup> Acts 20:3

<sup>5</sup> Acts 18:8

<sup>6</sup> economist, Romans 16:23; 2 Timothy 4:20

## 5. The Christian workers at Corinth.

Paul was the first to preach the gospel in Corinth and he was the founder of the church at Corinth (3:6,10; 4:15; 9:1-2). Silas and Timothy joined him in his work<sup>7</sup>. They stayed about 1½ years in Corinth<sup>8</sup>. When Paul departed, he took Priscilla and Aquila together with him to Ephesus<sup>9</sup>. Priscilla and Aquila had become Paul's co-workers and they in turn explained the gospel more clearly to Apollos. During Paul's absence, Apollos came to Corinth and preached the gospel there. He preached the same gospel, but did it in another way, which undoubtedly was connected to his education in Alexandria in Egypt, where Greek philosophy and rhetoric flourished<sup>10</sup>. Some Corinthians preferred his eloquence and philosophic method of teaching more than the simple unadorned preaching of Paul. This led to tension and the forming of factions within the church at Corinth (chapters 1-3).

## B. THE WRITER OF 1 CORINTHIANS.

In 1 Corinthians 1:1, the writer of the letter to the Corinthians introduces himself as "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." In 1 Corinthians 4:14-21 he makes it very clear that he not only wrote this letter, but that he was sending Timothy to the Corinthians to remind them of Paul's way of life in Christ, which agrees with what he teaches everywhere in every church. Also in 1 Corinthians 9:1-2 he emphasises that he founded the church at Corinth and that he was their apostle.

## C. THE DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING FOUR CORINTHIAN LETTERS.

The events recorded in Acts 13-20 took place between A.D. 47-57. Paul made three missionary journeys.

### 1. Paul's first missionary journey (1 year: A.D. 47-48).

Paul's first missionary journey was from A.D. 47-48 together with Barnabas and Mark. They went to Cyprus, Pamphilia, South Galatia and Cilicia in Asia Minor, which is modern Turkey.

In about A.D. 49/50, certain Jewish Christians came from Jerusalem to Antioch, saying that unless Gentile Christians were circumcised, they could not be saved. As a result, *a conference or consultation* was held in Jerusalem to speak about the relationship between the Jewish and the Gentile Christians. This conference is described in Acts 15 and Galatians 2. At this meeting of only two local churches, the Jewish Christians received a severe blow. They became known as "the Judaist party", a Christian sect which tried to turn Gentile Christians into Jews. They believed that all Christians should keep the Old Testament ceremonial law, especially circumcision, the Sabbath days and the food rules. They immediately plotted revenge. Their plan seemed to have been to follow the missionaries everywhere and oppose "the gospel of justification by faith alone". They came to Antioch, but Paul vigorously opposed them. They also came to the South Galatian churches in Asia Minor and succeeded to pull new believers into their legalism.

### 1. Paul's second missionary journey (2 years: A.D. 50-52)

Paul's second missionary journey was from spring A.D. 50 to spring A.D. 52 (2 years) together with Silas and Timothy. During the spring A.D. 50 they travelled through Syria (Antioch) and Cilicia (Tarsus) to establish churches in South Galatia (Derbe, Lystra, Iconium) in Asia Minor. Then in the summer A.D. 50 they crossed over to Europe and established churches in Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea) and Greece (Athens, Corinth).

Acts 18:12-17 speaks of the proconsul or governor of Achaia, called Gallio. According to an inscription on stone found at Delphi in Achaia, Gallio was proconsul or governor of Achaia for only one year starting from 1<sup>st</sup> July A.D. 51. *Paul was therefore in Corinth for one and a half years, from the autumn of A.D. 50 to the spring of A.D. 52.*

From Corinth Paul wrote *three letters* (Paul's 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> letters in New Testament): Galatians, 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians, all in the autumn of A.D. 50. During the spring of A.D. 52, Paul travelled to Ephesus and Jerusalem<sup>11</sup>.

### 4. Paul's third missionary journey (5 years: A.D. 52-57) (Acts 18:23 - 21:16).

Paul's third missionary journey was from the spring A.D. 52 to the summer A.D. 57 (5 years) together with Timothy (and Titus). Paul spent some time in Antioch and then travelled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening the disciples<sup>12</sup>. Paul then took the road through the interior of Turkey and arrived at Ephesus in the province of Asia. His journey to Ephesus must have taken some months. For *three months* Paul spoke boldly in the synagogue, arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Acts 18:5

<sup>8</sup> Acts 18:11

<sup>9</sup> Acts 18:19

<sup>10</sup> Acts 18:24-28

<sup>11</sup> Acts 18:18-22

<sup>12</sup> Acts 18:23

<sup>13</sup> Acts 18:23

Then for *two years* he held *daily discussions* in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. By adding the 3 months<sup>14</sup> to the 2 years<sup>15</sup> it approaches three years. For 3 years, probably from the autumn of A.D. 52 to the summer of A.D. 55<sup>16</sup>, night and day he never stopped warning each Ephesian believer.

*Paul paid **three visits** to Corinth<sup>17</sup> and wrote **four letters** to the Corinthians.*

Paul's **1<sup>st</sup> visit to Corinth** was during his second missionary journey from the autumn A.D. 50 to spring A.D. 52. (1½ years) during which Paul established and became closely attached to the church in Corinth<sup>18</sup>. During Paul's absence from Corinth, there was much contact between Paul and the Corinthians. This was possible, because *both Ephesus and Corinth were situated on the main trade route between the east and the west*. The journey from Ephesus to Corinth took about three weeks by sea.

Paul's **1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Corinthians** was written between A.D. 52-54. He wrote *a letter which we do not possess* and admonished the believers "not to associate with sexual etc. immoral people"<sup>19</sup>, that is, "those who call themselves brothers, but are sexual immoral". It is possible that the Corinthians misunderstood this letter and the letter was subsequently lost.

Paul's **2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthians** is our **1 Corinthians**. Paul wrote his **4<sup>th</sup> letter in the New Testament: 1 Corinthians** in Ephesus, probably in A.D. 54/55. His purpose was: "To teach that the Christian Church is *in* the world, but *not of* the world". He answered their questions and pointed out what needed to be changed. This letter did not upset the Corinthians. It showed that there was much communication between Paul and the Corinthians, that letters were exchanged and visits were paid.

In 2 Corinthians 8:10, Paul says "*Last year you were the first not only to do* (i.e. give towards the collection), but also *to have the will/desire* (to give)". The verb 'do' is in aorist tense and 'will' in the present continuous tense. The collection for the needy believers in Jerusalem<sup>20</sup> had possibly been started before 1 Corinthians was written<sup>21</sup>, but the Corinthians had not continued it, probably due to a change in attitude towards Paul caused by troublemakers. Thus, dependent on *when a year starts*<sup>22</sup> 1 Corinthians was probably written in A.D. 54/55, one or two years before 2 Corinthians, which was written in the autumn of A.D. 56.

The questions of the Corinthians together with other serious news Paul had received from Sosthenes, Chloe's household, Stephanas<sup>23</sup>, Fortunatus and Achaicus<sup>24</sup> concerning the state of affairs in Corinth, caused Paul to do three things:

- **He sent Timothy**. He had actually already sent (aorist tense) **Timothy** from Ephesus via Macedonia to Corinth to remind them of Paul's teachings<sup>25</sup>, but expected him to arrive after the 1 Corinthians letter<sup>26</sup>. Paul calls Timothy his faithful co-worker and says that Timothy would remind them of his way of life in Christ Jesus which agrees with his teaching everywhere in every church and that Timothy is carrying on the work of the Lord just as he is<sup>27</sup>. Timothy was entrusted with the difficult task of solving the problems in the Corinthian church, like party strife, sexual immorality, legal cases against one another, chaos in the worship meetings, etc.
- **He wrote 1 Corinthians** from Ephesus to them. He tells the Corinthian Christians that he would soon visit them and that it depended on them if he would come "with a whip" to discipline them or "in love and with a gentle spirit"<sup>28</sup>.
- **He shared his future plan** with them. He would stay on in Ephesus until Pentecost (June/late spring 54/55 A.D.) because a great door for effective work had opened for him<sup>29</sup>. His original plan was to pay the Corinthians a sort of double visit, crossing over the sea from Ephesus, stay a short while in Corinth, travel north to Macedonia and then spend the winter in Corinth before journeying on to Jerusalem<sup>30</sup>. However, this plan changed!

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<sup>14</sup> Acts 19:8

<sup>15</sup> Acts 19:10

<sup>16</sup> Acts 20:31

<sup>17</sup> 2 Corinthians 13:1

<sup>18</sup> Acts 18:1

<sup>19</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:9-11

<sup>20</sup> 1 Corinthians 16:1; 2 Corinthians 8:10; 9:2

<sup>21</sup> 1 Corinthians 16:2

<sup>22</sup> The Jewish and Macedonian year begin in the autumn and the religious Jewish year in the spring. The Athenian year begins in the summer and the Roman year in the winter.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:1,11,16

<sup>24</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:1; 16:12,17

<sup>25</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:17; see Acts 19:22

<sup>26</sup> 1 Corinthians 16:10

<sup>27</sup> Acts 19:22; 1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10

<sup>28</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:18-21; 11:34 (orderly directions); 16:2-9

<sup>29</sup> 1 Corinthians 16:8

<sup>30</sup> 1 Corinthians 16:5-9

Paul's **2<sup>nd</sup> visit to Corinth** was between writing 1 and 2 Corinthians. While he was in Ephesus, Paul soon received disturbing news about the state of affairs in the Corinthian church. There seemed to have been serious moral problems, especially sexual immorality, the spreading of Judaist teachings and the peddling of the Word of God for profit<sup>31</sup> Due to these problems Paul probably made *an unplanned short visit* about which we have very little information. He crossed the sea from Ephesus to Corinth and returned to Ephesus disappointed. This was "a painful visit"<sup>32</sup> and caused both Paul and the Corinthians much grief.

Paul's **3<sup>rd</sup> letter to the Corinthians** was written in Ephesus between writing 1 and 2 Corinthians. We also do not possess this letter. Paul wrote this letter "out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears". He admonished them, but also let them know his love for them. He wanted to prevent grieving them when he visited them a third time<sup>33</sup>. Nevertheless, this letter hurt/grieved the Corinthians<sup>34</sup>.

Paul then sent **Titus** from Ephesus to Corinth probably with the commission to remedy the fallout precipitated by this painful second visit<sup>35</sup> and to find out what effect the third letter had. Paul arranged to meet Titus in Troas.

So, after the great riot of the silversmiths in Ephesus Paul left Ephesus (A.D. 55) and travelled, not across the sea to Achaia, but via Troas to Macedonia<sup>36</sup>. The Lord had opened a wide door in Troas for Paul<sup>37</sup>. He expected to meet Titus in Troas, but finally travelled on and found him in Macedonia<sup>38</sup>. Paul must have stayed a considerable time (at least a year A.D. 55-56) in Troas and Macedonia, because the reaction to his painful second visit and third (now lost) letter took time. Paul also had wanted to visit the churches in Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea)<sup>39</sup> and travelled through that area (before arriving in Greece, Corinth)<sup>40</sup>. When Titus finally arrived in Macedonia, he reported the situation in Corinth. They had forgiven the transgressor that had caused much grief in Corinth and had given towards the collection for the poor Christians in Judea, but had not continued the collection. He also reported that some people at Corinth (Judaists) attacked Paul's apostleship and accused him of several bad things<sup>41</sup>, for example, Paul was fickle in his planning, he abused his apostleship by not asking money for his work, and that he was actually a weak person with a big mouth. Also **Timothy** met Paul in Macedonia<sup>42</sup>.

Paul's **4<sup>th</sup> letter to the Corinthians** is our **2 Corinthians**. Paul wrote his **5<sup>th</sup> letter in the New Testament: 2 Corinthians** in the autumn A.D. 56 from Macedonia, overjoyed by Titus' success. His purpose was: "To witness that God's strength is manifested through human weakness". Paul planned to visit Corinth, but feared that the Corinthians would not find him as they would like him to be and that he would not find them to be what he would like them to be<sup>43</sup>.

Paul writes that he had *not abandoned* his intended visit to Corinth, but had *changed* his travelling plans. He would no longer pay them a double visit, but a single longer visit after he had visited Macedonia. The purpose of this change of plans was to spare the Corinthian Christians<sup>44</sup> and to give them time to set their house in order in readiness for his visit, because he was fully prepared to exercise the sternest discipline, if necessary<sup>45</sup>.

Paul sent the letter together with **Titus** from Macedonia to Corinth, because Titus had the same concern for the Corinthians as Paul and acted in the same spirit and followed the same course<sup>46</sup>. He was accompanied by two other brothers, one of whom was a noted preacher. He was commissioned to organize the collections of alms for the Christians at Jerusalem<sup>47</sup>. Titus did not exploit the Corinthians (as the false apostles did)<sup>48</sup>. He had a heart for the Corinthians, was a trouble-shooter, peacemaker, administrator and devoted missionary.

Paul and Timothy spent the winter A.D. 56-57 in Macedonia.

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<sup>31</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:16-17

<sup>32</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:1

<sup>33</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:4

<sup>34</sup> 2 Corinthians 7:8

<sup>35</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:13; 7:13-16

<sup>36</sup> Acts 20:1

<sup>37</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:12

<sup>38</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:13; 7:5-14

<sup>39</sup> 1 Corinthians 16:5

<sup>40</sup> Acts 20:2

<sup>41</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:15-24

<sup>42</sup> Acts 20:4

<sup>43</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:19-21

<sup>44</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:23

<sup>45</sup> 2 Corinthians 13:2

<sup>46</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:16; 12:17-18

<sup>47</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:16-24

<sup>48</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:17-18

Paul's **3<sup>rd</sup> visit to Corinth** was in the winter early A.D. 57<sup>49</sup>. Paul and **Timothy** spent three months<sup>50</sup> in Corinth<sup>51</sup>.

Paul wrote his **6<sup>th</sup> letter in the New Testament: Romans** in the spring A.D. 57 from Corinth. His purpose was: "To teach that justification is only by grace through faith". **Timothy** is with Paul in Corinth<sup>52</sup>.

Due to a plot of the Jews against Paul, he left Corinth and returned to Syria via Macedonia<sup>53</sup>. He and Luke travelled via Philippi in Macedonia to Troas in Asia. His co-workers including **Timothy** waited for them at Troas<sup>54</sup>.

After the Feast of Unleavened Bread<sup>55</sup> (April 57 A.D.) Paul sailed past Ephesus because he wanted to reach Jerusalem by Pentecost<sup>56</sup> (June/late spring 57 A.D.). He made a stop to meet the elders of Ephesus at Miletus and taught them about Christian leadership<sup>57</sup>. After that, Timothy was probably together with Paul in Jerusalem<sup>58</sup>.

## **D. THE PURPOSE OF 1 CORINTHIANS.**

### **1. Correction and instruction with respect to behaviour.**

The church at Corinth was failing, because worldliness had gotten within its walls. *Instead of the church being a light in the sinful city of Corinth, the sinful practices of Corinth got into the church!* The Corinthian Christians had lost sight of God. Their mind was corrupted by human knowledge. Their conscience was darkened by choosing to do what they please instead of being willing to do what they should do. Their behaviour was perverted by giving full reign to their passions. The greatest danger to the Corinthian church was from within.

The main purpose of this letter is to correct and instruct the Corinthians with respect to Christian behaviour. Behaving as Christians ought to behave is the visible sign that Jesus Christ is their Lord! Paul had received disturbing news about various problems in the church at Corinth, especially about the divisions in the church (1:11). He had also received a letter from the church containing several questions to which the Corinthian Christians sought an answer (7:1). Paul wrote his beloved children in order to correct them (1:10; 3:18,21; 4:1,6; 5:11; 6:4), to admonish them to follow his example (4:14-16; 11:1), to answer their questions (7:1; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1) and to instruct them how Christians ought to behave themselves (10:14,25-27; 11:3; 13:1; 14:1; 15:1). He even gave them directions and the Lord's commands how to behave in the church (11:17; 14:37-38)! Paul's intention with this letter was to prepare the Corinthians for his coming visit, especially that his visit would not become a painful visit. He gave them a chance to solve their own problems *before* he came, so that he would not need to come with "the whip" of discipline, but could come to them in love and with a gentle spirit (4:21).

### **2. The Christian freedom.**

The Corinthian Christians were divided amongst one another. They were engrossed with Jewish and Greek philosophy in their preaching and arguments.

They were puffed up about their own importance and judged one another and even the apostles. They neglected their Christian duties. They dragged one another to court and even tolerated sexual immorality in their midst. *All these sins were to a great measure the result of the Corinthian view of freedom.* Their point of departure was, "Everything is permissible for me" (6:12; 10:23). They thought that a Christian had been set free by Christ and therefore they were *free* from any kind of restrictions. This complete misunderstanding of Christian freedom led to gross licentiousness (5:1; 6:16), spiritual pride (1:31; 4:6,18; 13:1-4) and a misuse of Christian freedom in several areas. They thought that Christians had the freedom to participate in religious festivals of another religion (8:10). They thought that Christian women had the freedom to behave like Christian men (11:5). They believed that Christians had the freedom to celebrate the community meals and the Lord's Supper as they wanted (11:20-21). They believed that Christians had the freedom to exercise the spiritual gifts like the speaking in tongues and prophesying as they wanted, no matter if it caused disorder in the church meetings (14:23,27-33)!

Paul accepted Christian freedom, but he condemned the way in which the Corinthian Christians misused Christian freedom. He taught the Corinthian Christians how to live as Christians in the midst of godless pagans. Just like the prayer of Jesus in John 17:15-19, he taught that the Christian Church is "*in the world*", but "*not of the world*"!

## **E. THE DIVISION OF 1 CORINTHIANS.**

The first letter of Paul to the Corinthians may be given **the title**: "**1 Corinthians - the life of righteousness in the Church.**" The letter portrays Jesus Christ as the LORD who should determine the behaviour of true Christians.

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<sup>49</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:14; 13:1

<sup>50</sup> Acts 20:3

<sup>51</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:1

<sup>52</sup> Romans 16:21

<sup>53</sup> Acts 20:1-3

<sup>54</sup> Acts 20:4-5

<sup>55</sup> Acts 20:6

<sup>56</sup> Acts 20:16

<sup>57</sup> Acts 20:17-37

<sup>58</sup> Acts 21:1 "we"

**The theme** of 1 Corinthians is written in 1 Corinthians 14:33,40, "God is not a God of disorder but of peace. Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."

The first letter to the Corinthians may be divided into two parts. The first part deals with Paul's *corrections* of the bad behaviour of the Corinthian Christians. The second part deals with Paul's *instructions* about how the Corinthian Christians ought to behave.

### **1. Part one. 1 Corinthians 1-6. Paul's corrections with respect to the behaviour of the Corinthian Christians.**

It consists of six sections, which almost correspond to the six chapters.

- In chapter 1:1-17 Paul addresses the divisions in the church.
- In chapter 1:18-2:16 he addresses their worldly wisdom.
- In chapter 3 he addresses their spiritual immaturity.
- In chapter 4 he addresses their spiritual pride.
- In chapter 5 he addresses their neglect to exercise discipline.
- In chapter 6 he addresses their selfishness.

### **Part two. 1 Corinthians 7-16. Paul's instructions with respect to the behaviour of the Corinthian Christians.**

It consists of ten sections, which correspond to the ten chapters.

- In Chapter 7 Paul instructs the Corinthians about how to walk according to their Christian calling, especially in the area of marriage or remaining single.
- In chapter 8 he instructs them about the interplay between knowledge of Christian freedom and love that builds up.
- In chapter 9 he explains why he is not making use of his Christian freedom.
- In chapter 10 he warns against the misuse of Christian freedom.
- In chapter 11 he instructs the women how to behave in public and instructs the church how to behave during their communion meals.
- In chapter 12 he instructs them about the unity in the church on the basis of a variety of calling and abilities.
- In chapter 13 he instructs them that love should determine all Christian behaviour.
- In chapter 14 he instructs them that building up the church should determine all behaviour in the church meetings.
- In chapter 15 he instructs them that the resurrection from the dead is an essential part of the gospel.
- In chapter 16 he instructs them about Christian giving and some other practical matters.

## **F. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF 1 CORINTHIANS.**

### **1. Christian freedom is the main line running through the letter.**

The evils at Corinth were especially sexual immorality, spiritual pride and abuse of Christian freedom in various areas. According to 1 Corinthians 6:12 and 10:23, the Corinthian Christians took their starting point in the rule, that for Christians "everything is permissible". They believed that Christians were free to do what they want. The apostle Paul corrects this wrong understanding of Christian freedom throughout the letter.

#### Christian freedom is a privilege and not a rule.

The apostle Paul taught that Christian freedom is a right (9:4,5,12) in the sense of a right to decide to do something or to give up doing something (9:15), thus a freedom of choice. Christian freedom is *the privilege of Christians to choose how they may behave in certain circumstances*, but it is never *a rule how Christians ought to behave under all circumstances*. All things that are not forbidden in the Bible are permissible, but not always edifying! They may be good, but are not always the best! Christians *may* do these things, but there is no *must* to do these things.

When Christian freedom is elevated to the status of a governing principle, two dangers emerge:

*The first danger* is that the things that are really forbidden by God under all circumstances are thought to be a choice and therefore permissible under certain circumstances. *Freedom then turns into permissiveness and the disintegration of morals*. And people are tempted to do things that are forbidden. For example, at Corinth certain church members fell into sexual immorality.

*The second danger* is that the things that are permissible for one person in certain circumstances are thought to be compulsory for all people in all circumstances. *Freedom then turns into a tyranny and the enforcement of behaviour patterns*. And people are forced to do things that do not build them up. For example, at Corinth there was the tendency to make the speaking in tongues during the church meetings the standard of Christian behaviour.

Paul set himself as an example of one who gave up his rights or freedom in order to attain his goals. In 1 Corinthians chapter 9, the apostle Paul says that he has the right and freedom to marry and the right or freedom to receive support from Christians. However, he chose not to make use of his rights or freedom. *He gave up his rights* in order to promote the progress of the gospel without hindrance (9:1-18). *He gave up his (national) identity* and set an example of accommodating himself to the customs and scruples of different kind of people in order to save some. *He gave up his comfort* and subjected himself to rigorous spiritual training in order not to be disqualified and miss the prize.

#### Christian freedom always has boundaries.

The apostle Paul taught that although all things that are not forbidden in the Bible are permissible, not all of these things are beneficial or constructive. And although all things that are not forbidden in the Bible are permissible, a Christian should not allow himself to become a slave of anything (6:12; 10:23). Freedom without boundaries leads to disintegration of morals and to tyranny. The apostle Paul taught that Christian freedom has boundaries! *The boundaries or limits of Christian freedom are whatever is beneficial, constructive and not enslaving!* Christians must know what to do or not to do in every concrete case. If the consequences of any permissible act are harmful for himself or for another person, the Christian no longer has the freedom to do it. If any permissible act causes him or someone else to become a slave or addicted, or if any permissible act causes him to sin against his own conscience or another person's conscience, then the Christian no longer has the freedom to do it!

#### Christian freedom should be ruled by God's Word.

In 1 Corinthians 4:6, the apostle Paul said, "I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, 'Do not go beyond what is written.'

Then you will not take pride in one man over against another". Paul warned that spiritual pride leads to the emancipation from God's Word. The Corinthian Christians were puffed up over against the apostles of Christ and over against one another. They regarded themselves as above other Christians. Their spiritual pride was rooted in the many spiritual gifts and blessings they had received, especially of speaking and knowledge (1:4-7). They behaved as if they had not received these gifts and blessings by God's grace. They imagined that they had already arrived at spiritual perfection. *The consequence of their sinful pride was that the Corinthian Christians felt and behaved as emancipated from God's word.* They probably held their spiritual gifts and the contents of the utterances by their spiritual gifts much higher than the words in the Bible! Paul admonished them not to go beyond the limit or boundaries set by the Bible! Spiritual pride shows itself by not submitting to the Bible or by exceeding the limit or boundaries of the Bible! You become really free when you are bound to Christ and to his words in the Bible. *But you become a slave when you regard yourself as free from Christ and his words in the Bible.* Christians are responsible to subject themselves to Christ and the Bible and never to become subject to anything or anyone else (3:23; 6:20; 7:23; 9:21).

#### Christian freedom should be ruled by love.

In 1 Corinthians 16:14, the apostle Paul taught, "Do everything in love!" In 1 Corinthians 13, he taught that if a Christian does not have love, "he is nothing" and "he gains nothing". And in 1 Corinthians 8:2, he teaches, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up!" If any permissible act becomes an expression of self-love that tears another person down, then the Christian has stopped to love. The knowledge of the strong Christians about which things are permissible may be right. For example, a Christian may know that he may eat everything. However, not knowledge, but Christian love has to determine his conduct! There is an important relationship between knowledge, love and building up. *Freedom* in the world is always concerned with your own individual rights and interests. But love is always concerned with other people's interests. Love is always concerned with the interests of the whole Christian community and with the non-Christian environment. The proper basis for Christian ethics in behaviour is not knowledge, but love. And love is the application of knowledge in a way that builds others up! In summary, Christian freedom is not *to do what we like to do*, but rather *to do what we should do*.

## **2. The question about the organisation of the Corinthian church.**

Because no mention is made of elders and deacons in the Corinthian church, some Christians have argued that the church at Corinth was still in a primitive stage and that there were no officers like elders and deacons in the church. They argue that the Corinthian church had a direct, spiritual government and was led by the Holy Spirit through the ministry of the spiritual gifts. This is not correct, because the Bible definitely does not presuppose a government of the church by spiritual gifts only. The apostle Paul functioned as one of the leaders and he gives clear directives (11:17) and commands (14:37) to the church. Moreover, the fact that no elders or deacons are mentioned does not prove that there were none!

#### Paul speaks of the appointment of church leaders for the world-wide Church.

The first letter to the Corinthians presupposes a certain organisation. The church was already a distinct community that could be differentiated from those outside the church (1:18; 5:13; 14:23). Moreover, 1 Corinthians 12:28 says, "God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers". The appointment of these offices is arranged in order of importance above all the other spiritual gifts. This verse cannot be understood of the local church at Corinth only, because this church had no apostles. Rather, the local church at Corinth is viewed in terms of the whole Body of Christ world-wide and its organisation is viewed in terms of the whole of the world-wide church's organisation (14:3). Generally speaking, in the earlier letters of Paul like Galatians, Thessalonians, Romans and Corinthians, Paul does not direct himself to the ordinary church leaders like elders to summon them to preach the pure word of God, to exercise discipline, etc. The reason is that all these churches were still young, the ordinary ministries had just begun to develop and much that was needed to be done was still done by the extraordinary church leaders like the apostles and their co-workers, people whom we would call *missionaries* or *evangelists* today. In the later letters of Paul like Ephesians, Philippians, Timothy and Titus, the ordinary church leaders like the elders come more to the foreground. But this fact does not mean that there were no ordinary church leaders in the beginning period and that the church was governed only by people with spiritual gifts.

#### Paul already speaks of ordinary church leaders.

The fact that he mentions functions as “those able to help others” and “those with gifts of administration”, shows that the church had a regular ministry. These two spiritual gifts could well have been associated with the functions of deacons and elders, even if these offices as such are not in the least bound to these spiritual gifts. The fact that according to Acts 14:23, Paul and his co-workers appointed elders in every church, also points to the existence of elders in the church of Corinth. The church at Corinth was founded during Paul’s second missionary journey in A.D. 50. The first letter to the Corinthians was written about 4/5 years later. Although it was a relatively new church, it was already well established. We do not read about the appointment of elders at Corinth, but if according to Acts 14:23 Paul already appointed elders in every church he founded during his first missionary journey, why would he not appoint elders at Corinth during his second missionary journey?

### **3. The question about persecution at Corinth.**

The first letter to the Corinthians presupposes that there was peace at Corinth. No mention is made of persecutions or any form of hindering or limiting the freedom of Christians at Corinth. It is true that according to Acts 18:12ff, the Jews had taken strong action against the apostle Paul, but they did not do the same against the church members.

This situation was probably due to the fact that Corinth was an international city and a large trading centre that attracted all kinds of people. There were people from different countries and they had different religions. By giving one another the freedom and quiet each desired, the city had peace and the people could get on with their trade or other business.

## **G. THE MAIN MESSAGES OF 1 CORINTHIANS.**

### **1. The foolishness of worldly wisdom.**

According to chapter 1-2, the gospel concerning Jesus Christ crucified was a stumbling-block for Jews and foolishness for the Greeks. The Jews demanded something they could see and grasp physically. They needed signs of power and they despised weakness. They expected a political Messiah who would free them from the yoke of all other nations. The Greeks demanded something they could grasp intellectually. They needed scientific evidence and philosophic wisdom and they despised the teachings of someone who never studied at Athens or Rome. But Paul did not preach Christ the conqueror or Christ the philosopher, but Christ the crucified. The wisdom of the Jews and the Greeks was *foolish, because it could not save people and did not reckon with God.*

### **2. The uselessness of proud judgement.**

According to chapter 4, the Corinthians were puffed up with their own importance. Consequently they judged others and even one another. They regarded their opinion of themselves and the opinion of other people about them as the most important thing to reckon with. However, Paul teaches that all people stand before three courts of judgement: the judgement of other people, the judgement of their own conscience and the judgement of Christ. People like to believe all the good things said about them and they resent unfavourable criticism. Therefore, Christians should beware of the judgement of their friends, because they may be too favourable in their opinion about them. Christians should not even judge themselves, because they really do not know themselves as well as Christ does. The One who will ultimately judge all people is Jesus Christ and from his judgement there is no escape.

### **3. The danger of sexual immorality.**

According to chapter 5-7, sexual immorality is a great danger to Christians and the church.

In chapter 5, the Corinthian Christians neglected to exercise discipline against a brother who lived in sexual immorality. They not only tolerated sexual immorality in their midst, they even continued to associate with such Christians and thus gave those people the impression that sexual immorality was acceptable within the Christian church. Paul strongly urged them to judge those inside the church, that is, to cut unrepentant Christians off from membership of the church and not to associate with them as long as they remain unrepentant.

According to chapter 6, the Corinthian Christians did not realise that God would punish sexual immorality. Because God created every human being, he owns every human body and *he* only has the right to decide how that human being should live. God wants to live in the body of human beings through his Holy Spirit. Because God is holy, he cannot and will not live in people who misuse their bodies for sexual immorality. People, who continue to live in sexual immorality, will be excluded from the kingdom (kingship) of God. This is a powerful stimulus for Christians not even to consider doing any of these things.

According to chapter 7, all Christians face “the present crisis or need”, which consists of the irresistible urge of his sinful nature to behave against his normal wishes. It is a compulsion from which he cannot free himself. Although Christ has conquered sin, the consequences of sin are still felt. Christians still have sinful, fallen natures and they ought to get married unless God has given them a special gift to remain single. All Christians face this present crisis or need until the second coming of Christ. The present crisis or need refers to the following three things: the many troubles in this present life that are a consequence of sin<sup>59</sup>; the time that is very short in this last age; and the world in its present form that is definitely passing away (7:28-31)<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> Genesis 3:16; Romans 8:18f

<sup>60</sup> 1 John 2:17

#### **4. The warning about taking God's covenant blessings for granted.**

Chapter 10 teaches that Christians may not take their salvation for granted. Although God granted his blessings to entire Israel at the beginning of the wilderness journey, at the end of the wilderness journey he gave that kind of blessings only to a few! Although all the Israelites were baptised into Moses, ate the manna and drank the water, yet in the end of the wilderness journey, God was not pleased with most of them. *Only a remnant* of them were not scattered and destroyed in the wilderness! This teaches that it is possible that God may begin to grant his covenant blessings to a group of people, but in the end not all of them will still enjoy those blessings. Paul does not say that genuine born-again Christians can lose their regeneration or salvation. But he does say that not everyone who outwardly behaves like a Christian or who participates in the Christian church activities is genuinely born-again. In verse 6 and 11 he gives a serious warning that this not only applied to God's Old Testament people, but also applies to God's New Testament people.

#### **5. The origin and purpose of the spiritual gifts.**

According to chapter 12-14, the Corinthian Christians were coveting the more showy spiritual gifts, such as the speaking in tongues. They were using these gifts as ends in themselves, desiring to be someone with power and be recognised by others.

Their spiritual gifts became a means to boost their spiritual pride, instead of using their spiritual gifts to serve others and build up the church. Paul teaches that God sovereignly determines the place of each Christian in the Body of Christ, his spiritual gift, his ministry and the way in which he manifests his ministry.

#### **6. The resurrection from the dead.**

According to chapter 15, there were some Christians at Corinth who could not believe in the physical resurrection from the dead. Paul teaches that the resurrection of Christ guarantees the truth and reality of the gospel as well as the future physical resurrection. The body of a Christian will be raised *imperishable* - it will never be able to die again. It will be raised in *glory* - it will share in the fruits of Christ's work and also share in his glory. It will be raised in *power* - sickness, pain, disabilities and all other weaknesses will be overcome and the body will have power to live eternally. It will be raised *a spiritual body* - it will be a real body that is completely renewed and governed by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, for the Christian, *death* is no more a terrible enemy, but the deliverance from the perishable, weak and natural body. Death and resurrection is the gateway to this reality and to a closer fellowship with Christ than ever before.

#### **7. The greatest Christian characteristic is love.**

According to chapter 13, Christian love should govern all the behaviour of the Christian. 1 Corinthians 16:22 says, "If anyone does not love the Lord - a curse be on him". The meaning is, that he who does not love Jesus Christ or other Christians, is *abandoned to God's judgement*. Whoever rejects God's love must face God's judgement. There is no escape!