

## The Apostle Paul in Corinth: Culmination of ‘The Second Missionary Journey’

James W. Ellis, PhD, JD<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA, Cardozo School of Law, New York, New York, USA

**ABSTRACT:** *The apostle Paul planted a Christian church in the Greco-Roman city of Corinth during the first century A.D.. Corinth’s location at a key East-West intersection, its cosmopolitan population, and openness to new religious ideas offered strategic advantages for disseminating the Christian faith. Paul’s efforts in Corinth were aided by an intriguing couple, Aquila and Priscilla, who shared both his vocation, tentmaking, and his mission, to “go and make disciples of all nations.” As he had done before, Paul continued his practice of first preaching the gospel message to Jewish audiences in Corinth’s local synagogue before moving out to evangelize to mixed Jewish and Gentile audiences, who began meeting in “house churches.” The Corinthians went through various doctrinal and spiritual crises, necessitating that Paul revisit the city more than once and send multiple epistles of instruction and encouragement. The apostle’s experiences with the Corinthians were a pivotal moment in the growth of Christianity, and serve as a cautionary tale for the church today.*

**KEYWORDS** -Aquila and Priscilla, Apostle Paul, Corinth, House Church, Second Missionary Journey

### I. INTRODUCTION: PAUL’S ITINERARY

After Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, and before his ascension, he gave his disciples a mandate known as *The Great Commission*. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20). Jesus’s final statement and directions to his disciples while he was still in bodily form, recorded in the book of Acts, was, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The remainder of the book of Acts seems organized “upon the plan of recording the progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, [to a large degree] the actual plan of campaign which [the apostle Paulin particular] adopted, and largely carried out, in his evangelization of the Roman Empire” [1, p. 326]. Indeed, Paul hoped to go beyond Rome to Spain (Romans 15:24, 28), which in the first century appeared to many to be “the ends of the earth,” but it is unclear whether he ever made it that far.

It is possible to reconstitute Paul’s itinerary in detail during his second missionary journey by piecing together various biblical passages, including Acts 15:32-18:22; 2 Corinthians 11:9; and 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5. Paul and Silas set off from Antioch of Syria to revisit the churches in the cities Paul had gone to during his first missionary journey, travelling land routes to Tarsus, then to the area of Derbe and Lystra, where they were joined by Timothy (Acts 16:1). In Asia Minor, the group limited themselves to the regions of Cilicia, Phrygia, and Galatia, “having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching in the province of Asia [where Ephesus was located]. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So, they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas [on the Aegean coast]” (Acts 16:6-8). It was in

Troas that Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia begging him, “Come ... and help us.” The missionaries, now joined by Luke, sailed to the Greek (Macedonian) coast, and founded the churches in Philippi and Thessalonica. Paul and Silas travelled on to Berea; it is unclear though whether Timothy went along, or stayed behind in Thessalonica and joined them later (see Acts 17:10, 14). Paul then left both Silas and Timothy in Berea and went on to Athens alone, but sent word the others should join him “as soon as possible” (Acts 17:15; see 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2).

While Paul was awaiting Silas and Timothy (Acts 17:16; see 18:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:6), he had his opportunity to address the meeting of the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-31). Although in Athens “a few men became followers of Paul and believed” (Acts 17:34), the city was still “the centre of pagan culture and religion,” and the apostle may have concluded nearby Corinth would be a more appropriate place to lay the foundation for a church [2, p. 78]. Paul’s stay in Athens proved to be of relatively short duration, before he ventured westward around sixty kilometres to Corinth (Acts 18:1) (Fig. 1). He could have travelled from Athens to Corinth either by boat, from the port of Piraeus to the harbour of Cenchreae, or via an overland route. Either choice had its own dangers. Sea voyages were beset by unpredictable currents and winds and a rugged, rocky coastline; the land route was notorious for its gangs of outlaws and robbers who preyed on travellers. In Paul’s later epistle to the church in Corinth, he described the hazards he encountered during his missionary journeys, including facing “danger from bandits” and “danger at sea” (2 Corinthians 11:25-26), perhaps in reference to his passage from Athens to Corinth.



Figure 1. The location of Corinth on a contemporary geopolitical map.

There were reasons to think the Corinthians would be a more receptive audience than the Athenians had been. Athens was inextricably tied to its past and celebrated history, and as a result of its fascination with earlier traditions had grown less “productive or creative,” viewing “new ideas,” such as Christianity, “with reserve” [3, p. 147]. Corinth, on the other hand, was more focused on the here-and-now and outward looking. Although the city-state of Corinth also had a storied past, going back to the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and beyond, in 146 B.C. the Roman general Lucius Mummius destroyed the city, which lay in ruins for a century thereafter. In 44 B.C., Roman general and dictator Gaius Julius Caesar (100 B.C.-44) reorganized Achaia as a Roman colony and a senatorial province, and Corinth (known as *Colonia Laus Julia Corinthiensis*) became the official provincial capital in 27 B.C. [4, p. 151]. The Romans populated the colonial city with *freedmen*, who built up a thriving commercial centre within a few short decades, with a population of around 100,000 inhabitants. Over the centuries Athens had become “complacent” and satisfied with its own achievements, Corinth was focused on contemporary life and the future and was willing to give new ideas a truly fair hearing [3, pp. 147-148].

For example, Corinth was home to diverse minority communities from the eastern Mediterranean, including many migrants from Asia Minor and Jews. Paul made accommodations and referenced Corinth’s

diversity in both his initial visit to the city and in his two subsequent extant letters to the Corinthian church [5, p. 100]. Whereas most Greek cities acknowledged unfamiliar deities (see, for example, the Athenian altar “to an unknown god” mentioned in Acts 17:23) and/or permitted cults of foreign gods, Corinth’s large foreign population made it particularly receptive to distant religions, evidenced by its abundant temples to Egyptian and Near Eastern native gods, as well as its Jewish synagogue [3, pp. 158-159; see also 6]. Corinth had a long tradition of cultic worship, and the Roman colonists who restored Corinth in 44 B.C. also restored the worship of most of the Greek and Greco-Roman pantheon: Athena (Minerva), Poseidon (Neptune), Hera (Juno), and Dionysos (Bacchus) [7, p. 158; see also 2]. The most conspicuous pagan temple in Paul’s day was the temple of Aphrodite (Venus), which loomed over the city atop the *Acrocorinth*, the large monolithic rock that served as Corinth’s equivalent to the Athenian acropolis (regarding Corinth’s religious architecture and recent archaeological discoveries and recoveries, see 8) (Fig. 2). At the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and love, “a thousand female slaves” presided, whose presence in the city, it has been said, gave Corinth its reputation for debauchery, “immorality” [7, p. 159], and sexual sin (see 1 Corinthians 5:1-2; 6:9-20; 7:1-2; 2 Corinthians 12:21). In addition to these traditional pagan cults, there is evidence of the presence of an imperial cult in Corinth (as well as in Athens and Ephesus) during Paul’s time, originating with some form of worship “of Julius Caesar, the founder of the ‘new’ city of Corinth in 44 B.C.” [9, pp. 319, 329-330].



Figure 2. Ruins of the Acrocorinth overlooking the ancient city.

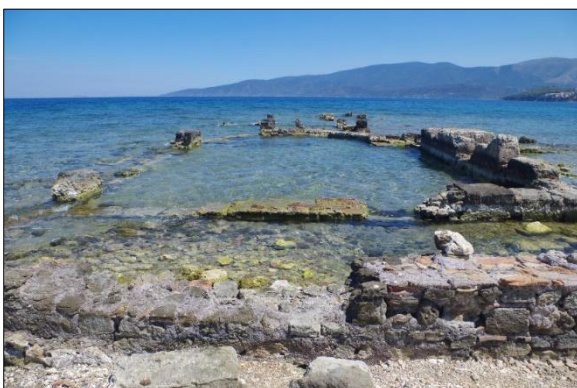


Figure 3. Ruins of Cenchreae, the eastern harbour of Corinth.

While the apostle Paul and his band of Christian missionaries could have viewed this multiplicity of religious practice as an insurmountable obstacle to their evangelical aims, in fact, Corinth’s openness to new religious ideas seemed to present more of an opportunity to them, an advantageous ground in which a new seed could grow. In Paul’s subsequent letters to the church he imbedded in Corinth, he makes use of the metaphor of

sowing and reaping, explaining that he “planted the seed” of the gospel in Corinth (1 Corinthians 3:6; see also 1 Corinthians 15:42-44; 2 Corinthians 9:6-7).

In addition to recognizing the advantages of Corinth’s religious openness, the apostle Paul, like the Roman colonizers and prosperous merchants of the city, would have appreciated the advantages of Corinth’s strategic locale, sitting on an isthmus linking the Peloponnese peninsula with the Greek mainland. Corinth had two harbours; one (Cenchreae) looked out toward Asia, the other (Lechaeum) looked out toward Italy (Fig. 3). In ancient times, ships were dragged across the isthmus so as to avoid the dangerous sea voyage around the Peloponnese peninsula, making the city literally a crossroad of the ancient world. Much of the trade of the Roman Empire was carried to-and-fro from the eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Seas (to the east) to the Ionian and Adriatic Seas (to the west), and, since Corinth controlled much of this traffic, through “its two harbours flowed the commerce [and people] of the world” [2, pp. 79-80]. It was the type of place where a nobleman such as the Spanish-born Roman proconsul of Corinth, Lucius Julius Gallio (c. 5 B.C.-A.D. 65), might cross paths with a Hellenised Jew of Tarsus, the missionary and apostle Paul [6, p. 15]. In other words—similarly to Philippi, Ephesus, or Rome—Corinth was an ideal strategic intersection and focal point that Christian missionaries and new Corinthian converts could exploit to disseminate the gospel message far and wide, throughout the Mediterranean and beyond.

## II. AQUILA & PRISCILLA

The eighteenth chapter of Acts begins with a matter-of fact statement: “After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth” (Acts 18:1). Apparently, he went from Athens to Corinth alone. Earlier, when Paul had gone from Berea to Athens, Silas and Timothy had stayed behind, though Paul sent them instructions to join him “as soon as possible” (Acts 17:15). Timothy, at least, followed these instructions and quickly rejoined Paul in Athens, though Paul thought it advisable to send Timothy back to Macedonia, specifically to Thessalonica, so he could “strengthen and encourage [the Thessalonians in their] faith” (1 Thessalonians 3:1-2). Timothy apparently took back with him at least two epistles Paul had written to the church in Thessalonica, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, the first two Christian writings that have come down to us [see 32]. Even though Paul went to Corinth alone, we are told he quickly made two new friends. “There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them” (Acts 18:2-3) (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Remains of an ancient Corinthian shop, the type where Paul may have sold his tents.

The emperor Claudius reigned from A.D. 41-54, and, although the precise date of his edict evicting Jews from Rome is unclear, some have posited it came early in his reign [10, pp. 183-195]. The Roman historian Suetonius (c. A.D. 69-122), in his work *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, wrote in his native Latin, “*Iudaeosimpulsore Chresto assiduetumultuantis Roma expulit*” (Claudius, 25), which has been translated by a prominent British ancient historian as, “Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of

Chrestus [or Christus, i.e. Christ], he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome” [11, pp. 184, 203]. A majority of scholars understand this to mean Jewish Christians in Rome were seen to be causing disturbances in the capital city due to their efforts to spread Christianity [see 12, p. 332]. If, indeed, Claudius’s edict was issued early in his reign, Aquila and Priscilla may have been among the first to preach the gospel in Rome, years before Paul reached the capital (see Acts 28:11-31; Romans 15:23-32). Conceivably, Paul went to see Aquila and Priscilla because he had heard of their faithfulness, not merely because they shared his trade of tent-making.

The Greek word translated as “tentmaker” (σκηνοποιός, transliteration *skēnopoios*), which appears only once in the New Testament, designates a manual labourer who made small portable tents for travellers, from leather, goat's hair, or linen. Bible commentator Matthew Henry wrote, “Though [Paul] was bred a scholar [a Pharisee, brought up at the feet of Gamaliel], yet he was master of a handicraft trade. ... he had learned the condescension of his Master [Jesus], who came not to be ministered to, but to minister” [13, p. 232; see Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; John 13:1-17]. During his ministry, when Jesus came to his hometown, “he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. ‘Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?’ they asked. ‘Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?’” (Matthew 13:54-55; see Mark 6:3). This passage indicates, before his ministry commenced, Jesus too was employed in manual labour, a carpenter and his father Joseph’s apprentice. When he started to preach his gospel of salvation, though, Jesus and his closest disciples received support from various followers, such as Mary Magdalene and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod’s household (Luke 8:1-3). Today, the term “vocational minister” is used to describe a person who works in a Christian setting and receives remuneration. Paul’s spiritual *vocation*, or calling, was to serve as Jesus’s “chosen instrument to proclaim [his] name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15); but his worldly *occupation* was that of a tentmaker, an occupation which Paul turned to in Corinth, at least at first. We are told when “Silas and Timothy [finally] came from Macedonia, Paul then devoted himself exclusively to preaching” (Acts 18:5), the implication being he stopped making tents. However, it must be noted that in his first letter to the church in Corinth Paul clarified that it is entirely appropriate if a minister is supported by the church he serves (1 Corinthians 9:4-14; see also Philippians 4:14-19).

The manner in which Luke (the author of Acts), ordered events in Acts 18:2-4 is intriguing. Paul first met Aquila and Priscilla, who were in Corinth because they could not remain in Rome. Paul then went to see them, and “stayed” and “worked with them,” because they were all tentmakers. After that, we are told, Paul “reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.” This sequence, if it is actually intended to be read as a sequence, does not suggest Aquila and Priscilla converted to the Christian faith due to Paul’s efforts, but, rather, that they were already converts. It would seem odd for Paul to stay with them if they had not already been believers. Furthermore, Paul’s first epistle to the church in Corinth appears to rule out the possibility he was responsible for their conversion (1 Corinthians 1:14-16; 16:15) [4, p. 151].

Neither the book of Acts nor Paul’s epistles mention when Aquila and Priscilla became Christians. Aquila was a Jew, and although he is called “a native of Pontus” (Acts 18:2), he may have been among the early Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who were compelled to flee from the city during the “great persecution [that] broke out against the church” following the martyrdom of Stephen in c. A.D. 36 (Acts 8:1). Or maybe Aquila was caught up among the even greater dispersion referenced by the apostle Peter, which “scattered” Christians to the provinces of “[Aquila’s native] Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1), probably during the reign of the emperor Nero. Some have even suggested Aquila and Priscilla’s conversions may have taken place in Rome or even in Corinth before Paul’s arrival, indicating they were involved in missionary work in both cities [4, p. 151]. In this case, Paul would be better understood as a founder of the first Christian congregation in Corinth, rather than as the first Christian to arrive in Corinth. Whatever the case, Aquila and Priscilla were important early missionaries in their own right [see 14, p. 214; 15, pp. 40-41].

From all we are told, they spent their time and energy travelling cross-culturally to spread the gospel. They were apparently among the Jews who caused “disturbances [in Rome] at the instigation of Chrestus.” They then travelled to Corinth and helped Paul set up a church there. They then sailed with Paul to Ephesus and established a church in their own home (1 Corinthians 16:19), where they instructed many, including the evangelist Apollos, in “the way of God” (Acts 18:18-28). They then returned to Rome, probably sometime after

Claudius's death in A.D. 54, and hosted a house church and "risked their lives" in helping build up the Gentile fellowship (Romans 16:3-5; see 16, p. 160). The last time Aquila and Priscilla are mentioned in the Bible (c. A.D. 66-67) they had returned to Ephesus and were helping Paul's close friend Timothy (2 Timothy 4:19).

It is striking that women including Aquila contributed so prominently to Paul's mission in Greece, and later in Ephesus. The apostle's first sermon on European soil was to a small group of women who had gathered together at "a place of prayer" beside a river outside the gates of the city of Philippi (Acts 16:13), and the first one who "opened her heart to respond" was Lydia (Acts 16:14). Also, among that small group of women may have been Euodia and Syntyche, whom Paul described as ones who had "contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with [others] of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life" (Philippians 4:2-3). In Thessalonica there were "not a few prominent women" who were "persuaded and joined Paul and Silas" (Acts 17:4). In Berea too, "a number of prominent Greek women" became believers" (Acts 17:12), as did a woman named Damaris in Athens (Acts 17:34). And in Corinth there were clearly believers among the household of a woman named Chloe, who remained in contact after Paul, Priscilla (and Aquila) left Corinth and sailed for Ephesus (1 Corinthians 1:11). Each of these women had a significant part in the church's early mission in Europe.

### III. "YOUR BLOOD BE ON YOUR OWN HEADS!"

As he had done in Thessalonica and Berea, in Corinth Paul went first to evangelize in the local synagogue (Fig. 5), hoping the spiritual ground had been properly laid among the Jewish community to facilitate successfully planting the gospel. In the synagogue, psalms were chanted, scriptures were discussed, the prophetic writings were studied, and the promised Messiah was contemplated. Among the Jews was surely also a substantial body of Gentiles, drawn to the moral messages of Judaism, though unwilling to follow "its ritualistic requirements" [1, p. 329]. Luke writes, "[Paul] *was reasoning* in the synagogue every Sabbath *and trying to persuade* Jews and Greeks [emphasis added]" (Acts 18:4 NASB). Those phrases, he "was reasoning" (*διαλέγομαι* transliteration *dialegomai*) and "trying to persuade" (*πειθω* transliteration *peithō*), are translated from Greek terms meaning to thoroughly discuss a claim in order to persuade and to induce one to take action based on an exhortation. These are the familiar techniques used in gospel sermons even today, and the style of rhetoric and persuasion to which the ancient Greco-Romans were accustomed. This was the style of rhetoric Paul had also used in his address to the philosophers in Athens (Acts 17:22-31). As Matthew Henry has written, Paul conveyed the gospel "not by force and violence, by fire and sword, not by demanding an implicit consent, but by fair arguing ... and [by giving] a reason for what [he] said, and liberty to object against it, [and by] having satisfactory answers ready" [13, p. 234]. It should be noted though, in the ensuing letters Paul sent to the various churches he had established (including the one in Corinth), his messages and rhetorical style varied considerably depending on their specific needs, demonstrating the apostle's "creativity and adaptability" [17, p. 501].



Figure 5. Corinthian carving featuring three menorahs, evidence of the city's ancient Jewish community and architecture.

When “Silas and Timothy [finally] came from Macedonia, Paul [ceased making tents and] devoted himself *exclusively* [emphasis added] to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah” (Acts 18:5). The implication being that Silas and Timothy had brought some form of financial gift, most likely from the church in Philippi (see Philippians 4:15-18; 2 Corinthians 11:9), which gave Paul the freedom to focus on his true mission. The Greek term translated as “testifying” (διαμαρτύρομαι transliteration *diamartyromai*) suggests Paul confirmed Jesus was the Christ by presenting evidence so the hearers would believe, the way witnesses give evidence in a court of law. Paul would have presented both his own eyewitness testimony (see Acts 9:1-19) and documentary evidence from the Hebrew scriptures (see, for example, Acts 13:16-41).

The rulers of the synagogue apparently permitted this to continue so long as Paul had a willing audience. But after a few sabbaths, his message proved to be more and more divisive. Eventually a faction rose in opposition to Paul and his testimony, “and became abusive, [so] he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles’” (Acts 18:6). Paul withdrew from the Corinthian synagogue, taking with him a few Jewish converts and Gentile believers to form a new church. When Paul shook the dust from his clothes and left the synagogue, he symbolically showed he had done everything possible, and could leave with a clear conscience, no longer in any way responsible for the fate of the detractors. When Jesus sent out his disciples to proclaim his message to the towns and homes of “the lost sheep of Israel,” he said, “‘If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet. Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town’” (Matthew 10:6-7, 14-15; see also Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5). On Paul’s first missionary journey, when he was preaching in Pisidian Antioch, the Jews also “stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. So, they shook the dust off their feet as a warning to them” (Acts 13:50-51), and left to move on to the next stage of their ministry. This process was repeated in Corinth.

#### IV. FROM THE SYNAGOGUE TO THE HOUSE CHURCH

After Paul left the synagogue, he “went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God” (presumably to continue preaching in his house), and many “believed and were baptized,” including entire households (Acts 18:7-8). There is no mention of Paul ministering at any other location in Corinth, so it is fair to assume Titius Justus’s residence became a type of *house church*, and even a primary centre or base for Paul’s work in Corinth (Fig. 6). It seems justified to presume Titius Justus was a Gentile who was in some way associated with the synagogue, which was “next door” to his house, and was familiar with the teachings of Judaism [see 18, p. 217]. The name Titius was a variant of Titus, a common Roman personal name (or *praenomen*). Justus may have been appended to distinguish this individual from Paul’s frequent companion named Titus (see Galatians 2:3; 2 Timothy 4:10), another Gentile believer who also served the church in Corinth (2 Corinthians 8:6, 16-17).

Both Gentiles and Jews were welcomed to the gatherings in Titius’s home, including a prominent leader of the synagogue named Crispus. Crispus may have been the official who had originally welcomed Paul into the synagogue when he arrived in Corinth, and continued his support after others rose in opposition and became abusive. After Paul relocated to the residence of Titius Justus, Crispus “and his entire household believed in the Lord,” as did many other Corinthians who heard Paul’s testimony and “believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8). Once Crispus converted, he may have been forced to relinquish his position in the synagogue, possibly to be replaced by a man named Sosthenes, who, later in Acts 18, is also described as a “synagogue leader” (Acts 18:17). Or it could have been Crispus and Sosthenes were coleaders of the same synagogue, or even oversaw separate synagogues. Later, in his first epistle to Corinth, Paul names Crispus as one of the few people he personally baptized in the city, along with Gaius and “the household of Stephanas” (1 Corinthians 1:14, 16). However, Paul understood that Christ had chosen him primarily to preach the gospel, and the act of baptism he usually left to others (1 Corinthians 1:17), in Corinth perhaps to Silas and Timothy. Jesus Christ also focused much of his time on preaching, teaching, and performing wondrous acts, and apparently left

it to his disciples to perform baptisms under his authority (John 4:2; see also Acts 10:48, where the apostle Peter delegated baptism to others). Whatever the case, the new local church in Corinth had a nucleus of founding members. We are told, at this point Paul received another vision, as he had in Troas (Acts 16:9). The Lord told Paul, “‘Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.’ So, Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God” (Acts 18:9-11).



Figure 6. Ruins of an ancient dwelling and fountain in Corinth.

As the number of converts increased, the need for an appropriate assembly place would have grown more pressing. Paul’s contentious relationship with some in the Jewish community ruled out the local synagogue, “and Christianity’s lack of status put any other [large] public meeting-place out of the question. Private houses, therefore, became the centres of church life” [3, p. 157]. A few Roman-era houses have been excavated at Corinth, some with sufficient space to accommodate 40-50 visitors (Fig. 6), though, even in these homes, only half of the guests could have fit into the relatively comfortable dining room (*triclinium*), while others, possibly of lower social standing, would have been allocated the less luxurious open-roofed atrium nearby [3, p. 157; see Acts 18:7; Romans 16:23]. This spatial separation seems to have led to the formation of social factions and divisions among the Corinthian Christians, and even to unruly incidents involving “unworthy” partaking of the Lord’s Supper or Communion (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). In Corinth’s house church meetings, partaking of the Lord’s Supper was interconnected with a fellowship meal known as the *love feast* or *agape feast* (see Acts 2:46-47; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34; Jude 12), at which more wealthy members supplied food that was intended to be shared with poor brethren. However, in practice participants tended to prioritize their own desires over the needs of others [see 19, p. 182]. For this, Paul chastised the Corinthians. “So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing?” (1 Corinthians 11:20-22). The diverse backgrounds of the Corinthian fellowship contributed to rifts and misunderstandings, which Paul tried to help the church overcome (1 Corinthians 12-13).

Within this context, it is important to properly define the word “church,” to avoid the common error of regarding the house (or structure) in which the Christians met as ‘the church.’ In truth, the people, rather than the structures, *were* the church. They opted initially to assemble in Titius Justus’s house, though they could have assembled anywhere else in Corinth and retained their identity as a local church. The Greek term transliterated *ekklesia* or *ecclesia* (ἐκκλησία), which in the New Testament is nearly always translated into English as “church,” in a Christian sense, refers to a “called-out” assembly or congregation (though there are a few exceptions in Acts 19:32, 39, 41, where the Greek term is translated as “assembly” to refer to a pagan gathering). While “the church” may refer to the entire body of Christians throughout the earth, whether living or already dead (see Matthew 16:18), “a church” refers to an assembly of Christians in a particular place (see Acts



8:1; 11:26). The New Testament church was understood to be people whom God had called out to live in a way that was distinct from the ways of the world (1 Peter 1:14-16), yet to still serve as the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). In his epistles, Paul used the term *ekklēsia* to refer to Christians who [1] assembled for collective worship (1 Corinthians 11:18; 14:4, 19, 28, 34); [2] assembled in a specific community, city, or area (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Colossians 4:16); and/or [3] assembled in the house of an individual member (1 Corinthians 16:19; Romans 16:5; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2). Paul writes about the church in Corinth in each of these three ways, and strives to instill in the Corinthians an understanding that they were no longer simply Jews or Greeks, but joint members of “the church of God” (1 Corinthians 10:32; 20, pp. 294-295). “Paul thought of believers as organically included in one *ekklēsia* [and] never seems to have thought of a Christian as existing apart from the church” [20, p. 298]. A new convert meeting in a house church in Corinth was “one in Christ Jesus” with all believers (Galatians 3:28), including Jesus’s first disciples meeting at the assembly in Jerusalem.

## V. TRIAL BEFORE GALLIO

Of course, not everyone wanted to be “one in Christ Jesus.” As had happened in Thessalonica and Berea earlier, opposition to Paul’s mission in Corinth intensified until it reached a boiling point. Paul first came to Corinth while Gallio was proconsul of the southern Greek province of Achaia. Gallio was the brother of Seneca (c. 4 B.C.-A.D. 65), the Roman philosopher and tutor of the emperor Nero (A.D. 37-68). And while “Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to Gallio’s place of judgment. ‘This man,’ they charged, ‘is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law’” (Acts 18:12-13). Other Bible translations say, “the Jews *with one accord* [ὁμοθυμαδόν transliteration *homothymadon*] *rose up against* [κατεφίσταμαι transliteration *katephistamai*] Paul” (Acts 18:12 NKJV). The sense is they rose up ‘with one mind’ or ‘with one passion,’ i.e. ‘with hostile intent.’ The riot or Jewish mob scene became commonplace in Paul’s initial journey through Macedonia and Achaia, and when he continued onward to Ephesus (Acts 17:5-9; 18:12-17; 19:23-41; see 21). And there is a clear “narrative pattern”: Paul and his associates have some success evangelizing, which brings on vilification (in Thessalonica and Corinth by Jews; in Ephesus by pagans), and presentation for punishment before city officials. Rome’s ruling authorities were perpetually on guard against any threat of an uprising or rebellion, particularly involving minority communities, such as Jews, and particularly in the empire’s eastern provinces, and were quick to identify volatile crowds and punish instigators and “firebrands.” [see 22, pp. 634-637]. Though Luke consistently portrays Paul and the other missionaries as victims of an unbridled mob mentality, when they are ultimately presented before a person with legal jurisdiction, the mob’s charges invariably are rooted in fomenting political and social unrest by defying the governing powers and encouraging others to do the same (Acts 16:20; 17:7; 18:13).

In Thessalonica, a mixture of Gentiles and Jews (Acts 17:5) brought charges involving treason: “They are all defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.” When the city officials heard this ominous allegation, they “were thrown into turmoil” (Acts 17:7-8). What happened in Corinth was quite different though. A group of Jews (without Gentile cohorts) brought Paul into court, and charged, “This man ... is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law” (Acts 18:13). The Romans recognized Judaism, but at this time did not recognize the Christian faith Paul advocated. However, the subtlety of the accusation may have been lost on Gallio, who sensed this dispute hinged on a question of Jewish religious law. “Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to them, ‘If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanour or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law—settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things.’ So, he drove them off” (Acts 18:14-16).

Though Gallio “drove off” the Jewish band of accusers, they did not go far. Within Gallio’s view, they turned on a synagogue leader named Sosthenes, and “beat him in front of the proconsul; and Gallio showed no concern whatever” (Acts 18:17). Why was Sosthenes targeted for this abuse? Recall that when Paul was compelled to move his base of evangelism from the Corinthian synagogue to the residence of Titius Justus, the

synagogue leader, Crispus, “and his entire household believed in the Lord ... and were baptized” (Acts 18:8; 1 Corinthians 1:14), and Crispus’s family presumably joined Paul in the new house church. Sosthenes may have done the same, and attached himself to Paul’s mission. Indeed, Sosthenes may have accompanied Paul (and Priscilla and Aquila) when he left Corinth for Ephesus (see Acts 18:18). When Paul was in Ephesus and wrote the epistle of 1 Corinthians, he sent the church in Corinth greetings from “our brother Sosthenes” (1 Corinthians 1:1). After Gallio thwarted the mob’s demand for a public denunciation of Paul, the band of Hellenist Jews or Jewish Greeks [13, p. 238] may have opted to take vengeance on Sosthenes, as Paul’s stand-in and Christian “brother,” and to publicly, though indirectly, express their scorn for Gallio’s authority.

There is an imaginable alternative explanation though. The man named Sosthenes whom Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 1:1 as “our brother” may have been a different individual than the man Luke describes in Acts 18:17 as “the synagogue leader.” Perhaps the man Luke mentions in Acts 18 was a ringleader who instigated the ill-fated uprising against Paul and influenced the others to participate in bringing the apostle before Gallio’s place of judgment, and when Sosthenes’s scheme failed to come to fruition, “the crowd” may have simply vented their frustration on Sosthenes. And, again, because in Gallio’s estimation the whole affair involved questions about Jewish religious law that should be settled among themselves (Acts 18:15, 17), he may have accepted the fate of Sosthenes as a just resolution. If this is so, the beating of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, might be understood as a penalty Gallio tacitly endorsed as “just punishment for bringing false [spiritual] charges” [22, p. 637].

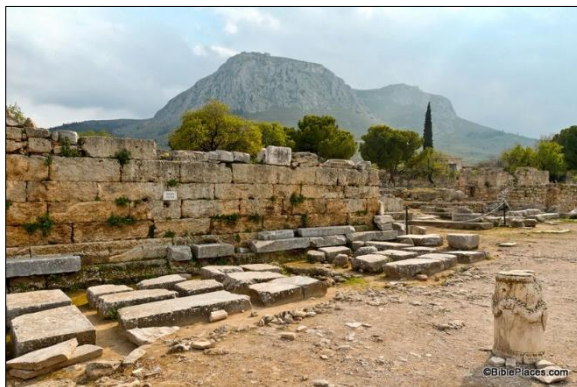


Figure 7. The Bema at Corinth.

Among the ruins of the Corinthian *agora*, the open space where people assembled and conducted business and commerce, archaeologists have excavated a sturdy stone platform that probably once served as a *bema* (βῆμα) (Fig. 7). In ancient Greece, the bema was a raised podium from which orators addressed citizens or government officials and judges issued declarations. A bema was also usually found in synagogues, and from this platform Rabbinical authorities would read the Torah and Hebrew scriptures. The bema excavated in Corinth would have originally been located in a public space, rather than in the official audience rooms of the nearby secular Roman basilica that may have served as a law court [23, p. 44; see 3, pp. 153-154]. Quite possibly, Gallio made public proclamations and rendered more informal legal judgments from the bema the archaeologists unearthed. The biblical narrative does not suggest Paul was afforded “a special formal legal process”; on the contrary, it is more likely “that Gallio had just finished making a public pronouncement when [the Jews] hustled [Paul] forward. ... The irregularity of the procedure [might be one] explanation of Gallio’s summary dismissal of the accusation” [3, pp. 154-155]. It may not be a coincidence that later Paul warned the Corinthian Christians against going to secular civil courts to settle *inter-fraternal* troubles [19, p. 188]. ““If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the Lord’s people? ... [Are] you not competent to judge trivial cases? ... Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, do you ask for a ruling from those whose way of life is scorned in the church? ... Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother takes



he visited before finishing his work to his satisfaction, and “it is significant that in the only two [major metropolitan centres] where he was not earlier expelled—Corinth and Ephesus—he remained a considerable time” [1, p. 327].

It is reasonable to consider the apostle Paul’s two-year-three-month residence in Ephesus (which convention places in his third journey) within a broader context including his forerunning visits to Philippi, Athens, and Corinth (conventionally part of his second journey). Each of the four cities were ancient gateways through which “the East” entered “the West,” and vice-versa. Corinth and Ephesus, in particular, were thriving centres of commerce and trade, through whose ports flowed the merchandise and wealth of the Roman Empire, from the Levantine coast, across the Aegean and Ionian Seas, and onward to the capital (and vice-versa). In a similar way, the gospel of Jesus Christ flowed outward from the Roman province of Judaea, along the Levantine coast, across Asia Minor, through the ports of Ephesus and Corinth, and onward to the capital. The apostle Paul was a chief navigator on this ongoing westward expansion.

## VII. APOLLOS

The early missionary spirit connecting Corinth and Ephesus was embodied not only in Paul, but also in his associates Aquila and Priscilla, and later in the evangelist named Apollos. The book of Acts says Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla left Corinth together and sailed for Ephesus. Then Paul went on his own to Caesarea, Jerusalem, and Antioch, before returning again to Ephesus (Acts 18-23; 19:1). During the interim,

“a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia [the Roman province where Corinth was located], the brothers and sisters encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah” (Acts 18:24-28).

We are told Apollos had a “thorough knowledge of the scriptures,” but even if his time in Ephesus occurred as late as the eve of Paul’s return to Ephesus (mentioned in Acts 19:1), Apollos’s knowledge would have extended mainly to the Hebrew scriptures, and perhaps also to some of the earliest writings of the canonical Christian New Testament (e.g., James, Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians). That he “knew only the baptism of John,” suggests Apollos was not entirely familiar with Christ’s Great Commission (“... go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ...” [Matthew 28:18-20]) or with what had happened at Pentecost (“Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ ...’” [Acts 2:38]). And Apollos may have been unaware, generally, about the founding of the church and its outreach to the Gentiles. Aquila and Priscilla helped Apollos attain a fuller understanding of the teachings and mission of Jesus Christ, an understanding he then shared with the people of Achaia.

The Roman province of Achaia is mentioned in several books of the New Testament (Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and 1 Thessalonians). The province was a focus of Paul’s missionary efforts, and of course he spent two years living in Corinth. He also later spent at least three months visiting churches in the province (Acts 20:1-3) during his “third missionary journey.” Cities in the province included Athens (see Acts 17:16-34), Cenchrea (Acts 18:18; Romans 16:1), and Corinth. The book of Acts is unclear which churches in Achaia Apollos visited, if any, before he eventually found his way to Corinth (Acts 18:27-19:1).

The Corinthians were apparently quite impressed by Apollos’s innate gifts, and that he was so “learned,” and possessed such “thorough knowledge,” and spoke with great “fervour” (Acts 18:24-25). So much so, a type of cult of personality developed around Apollos in the Corinthian church, which fostered divisiveness.

Paul felt compelled to address this situation in his first epistle to the Corinthians. “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household [evidently a Christian in Corinth] have informed me that there are quarrels among you. ... One of you says, ‘I follow Paul’; another, ‘I follow Apollos’; another, ‘I follow Cephas [the apostle Peter]’; still another, ‘I follow Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand that he and Apollos and Peter taught the same message, and the message was what mattered, not the messengers. Later in the same epistle, Paul again chastised the Corinthians for their factiousness and worldliness. “Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not mere human beings? What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe ... I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ... For we are co-workers in God’s service ... ” (1 Corinthians 3:3-7, 9).

Though the tendency is to understand this competition in the minds of the Corinthian fellowship within theological parameters, some commentators have noted similarities between the language Paul employed and the rhetoric of political discourse. One has written, “the form of the slogans” Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 1:12 (‘I follow Paul’; ‘I follow Apollos’; ‘I follow Cephas’; ‘I follow Christ’) “reflects the principle at work in the creation of ancient political parties: throughout antiquity personal adherence is the basic relationship from which party identification developed, as personal enmity is the social reality behind the concept of the opposing faction” [28, p. 90]. Ultimately, Paul attempted to guide the Corinthian Christians away from a political mindset, and help them understand they should not view gospel preachers such as Paul, Apollos, or Peter in the same way as political leaders and candidates, who offer contrasting views and conflicting objectives. Later in 1 Corinthians, Paul writes, “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

### **VIII. CONCLUSION: PAUL’S CONTINUING CONCERN FOR CORINTH**

When Paul left Corinth, he left behind a “vibrant and growing” Christian fellowship, but one that was also “open to a wide range of ideas from inside and outside of the Christ-assembly,” and this “openness” fostered schisms “that were expressed in leadership factions, class structure issues, and conflicting worship styles” [18, p. 218]. Paul addressed these schisms in his two extant letters to the Corinthians (1 and 2 Corinthians), which he wrote from Ephesus three or so years after leaving Corinth. In each of the surviving epistles the apostle intervenes in the doctrinal confusion and divisions that had developed among the fellowship during the ensuing years.

In his second epistle, generally dated A.D. 55, Paul writes, “Now I am ready to visit you for the third time ...” (2 Corinthians 12:14; see also 2:1-4; 13:1). The biblical accounts do not indicate precisely when Paul’s second visit to Corinth may have occurred. Some writers maintain it happened before 1 Corinthians was written [see 33], perhaps during the period in which Paul was “spending some time in Antioch” (Acts 18:23); and others suggest it transpired between the writing of 1 and 2 Corinthians, during a hiatus in Ephesus (see Acts 19:8-10). Intriguingly, in 1 Corinthians Paul also refers to a letter he had previously written to the church in Corinth, an epistle which apparently has not been preserved (1 Corinthians 5:9). In this mysterious letter, Paul had warned the Corinthians “not to associate with sexually immoral people” who were connected with the church. Some have noted a shift in tone and topic in the last four chapters of 2 Corinthians, and posited these chapters may have been written earlier as part of the lost epistle [29]. In addition, the existence of even a fourth possible letter (also lost) is suggested by 2 Corinthians 2:3-4, though its contents are more speculative. Paul apparently had considerably more contact with the Corinthians than is revealed in the biblical record, and they occupied his thoughts long after the conclusion of his so-called second missionary journey [18, pp. 218-220; 30; see also 1 Corinthians 5:9; 2 Corinthians 2:3-4; 7:8; 13:1-2]. The apostle’s repeated visits to the city and his ongoing

correspondence with the church while he was away clearly demonstrated his personal interest and pastoral concern for both the Corinthian people and their congregation.

Reading Paul's surviving epistles gives one a sense of his deep understanding of Corinthian people, society, and culture. For example, he alludes to a personal knowledge of the means by which legal disputes were resolved in the city (1 Corinthians 6:1-11). He also betrays an awareness of the practices of Corinthian farmers and shepherds, and the attendants of the pagan temples (1 Corinthians 8:10; 9:7-14). Paul even seems to reference Corinth's biennial Panhellenic Isthmian Games (1 Corinthians 9:24-27), athletic and musical competitions held in honour of the sea god Poseidon. The apostle "spoke to [the Corinthians] not as an outsider but as one of their own people" [2, pp. 96, 151]. In addition, Paul wrote to the Corinthians concerning matters that continue to resonate within the contemporary Christian world, including the individual tendency to cling to one's familiar socio-political value-systems; the attraction of materialism and worldly success; preoccupation with personal autonomy; the inclination to form allegiances to 'local' theologies and/or particular ministers [31, p. 320; see also 18]; and the corrosive effect of personal priorities on the public assembly and worship. Many problems that confronted first-century Corinthians persist into the twenty-first century. As a consequence, the apostle Paul's experiences in Corinth were not simply a pivotal moment in the early dissemination of the Christian faith. His experiences and his surviving letters continue to be useful and informative for the church today.

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