

Building a Fireproof Church

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A Church in the Furnace of Corinth

A Church in a Pagan City

The church at Corinth was born in a city of unparalleled wealth, brazen immorality, and entrenched idolatry, yet it became a shining beacon of God's grace. As we begin our study of 1 and 2 Corinthians, we explore how the Apostle Paul addressed the challenges of this vibrant yet deeply troubled congregation. His goal was not just to fix a few problems, but to build a fireproof church—a body of believers rooted in the gospel, united in purpose, and resilient against division. The Corinthian church faced issues that resonate deeply with churches today: divisions over personalities, moral compromise in the face of cultural pressure, and pride in human wisdom. Paul's letters offer timeless wisdom for overcoming these challenges, calling us to a radical unity found only in Christ.

This chapter introduces the context of Corinth, a city and a culture whose characteristics are essential to understanding Paul's message. We will trace Paul's

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journey to the city and his establishment of the church. We will then delve into the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 1, where Paul immediately confronts their disunity by calling them back to the very first principle of their faith: their shared identity in Christ as a community of saints. Through Paul's words, we will discover the ultimate foundation of a fireproof church: a shared calling to be holy, set apart, and united in the fellowship of Jesus Christ.

The City of Corinth: A Challenging Mission Field

To grasp the challenges the Corinthian church faced, we must first understand the city of Corinth itself. It was no sleepy fishing village. Rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44 BC, the city was a thriving Roman colony and a major trade hub at the crossroads of the Greek peninsula. Its unique geographical position, situated on a narrow isthmus with ports on both the Aegean and Ionian seas, funneled commerce across the Mediterranean, making it one of the wealthiest and most cosmopolitan cities in the Roman Empire. Its prosperity was fueled by a ruthless culture of competition and an infamous reputation for vice. The phrase "to act like a Corinthian" (*korinthiazesthai*) was a Greek byword for debauchery, a direct reference to the city's notorious temple of Aphrodite, which housed over a thousand sacred prostitutes.

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Beyond the temples and taverns, Corinth was a city of fierce social stratification. A small, elite population of Roman citizens enjoyed significant legal and social privileges, while a vast underclass of slaves, laborers, and transient merchants jostled for position and survival. This created a culture where personal status, public reputation, and intellectual prowess were paramount. People in Corinth didn't just compete for money or power; they competed for recognition, to be seen, to be heard, and to be praised. This culture of one-upmanship was vividly displayed in the Isthmian Games, which were held in Corinth every two years, second only to the Olympics in prestige. These games brought fame-seeking athletes, ambitious orators, and spectators from across the Roman world, reinforcing a spirit of fierce, individualistic competition.

In this environment, Paul's message of a crucified, humble Savior was deeply countercultural. The gospel calls for self-denial and unity, the opposite of a city built on self-promotion and individual achievement. God chose this unlikely, prideful place to establish a community that would reflect His light in the darkness, a stark and powerful testament to the gospel's ability to transform even the most challenging of hearts and cultures.

Corinth as a Roman Colony: A Deeper Look

To understand the social and economic fabric of Corinth, we must explore its status as a Roman colony. In 44 BC, Julius Caesar refounded the city, which had been destroyed by the Romans a century earlier. The city was repopulated with a large number of Roman freedmen and veterans who were granted land and citizenship. This strategic move was not just a rebuilding effort; it was a deliberate act of cultural and political colonization. This Roman foundation had profound implications for the social and economic life of the city.

Socially, the city was a microcosm of Roman society, with a clear hierarchy. The top tier consisted of Roman citizens, who held the most power and wealth. They had the right to vote in local elections, own property, and be tried under Roman law. Below them were the Greek inhabitants and a large population of slaves and freedmen. This social divide was a constant source of tension. The Roman citizens, proud of their status, would have looked down on the Greek culture that surrounded them, even as they benefited from its economic prosperity. The local church, a mix of both Roman citizens and Greek freedmen and slaves, was a radical social experiment. A Roman citizen and a Greek slave were

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now brothers and sisters in Christ, an unheard-of concept in the Roman world.

Economically, Corinth's colonial status made it a hub for Roman trade and commerce. Roman veterans brought with them agricultural knowledge and an appreciation for Roman luxuries. The city was rebuilt with Roman infrastructure, including a Roman-style forum, temples, and theaters. The Isthmus, the narrow strip of land connecting the Peloponnese to mainland Greece, was a crucial trade route. Instead of sailing the dangerous journey around the peninsula, many ships would offload their goods at one port, have them carried across the isthmus, and reloaded onto another ship on the other side. This created an incredibly wealthy and bustling economy, but it also fostered a culture of cutthroat competition. People in Corinth were driven by money and status, and their spiritual lives were often an extension of this worldly ambition. The factions in the church—I am of Paul, I am of Apollos—were a direct reflection of this culture, where people sought to align themselves with a powerful leader to gain status and influence. Paul's message, which called for a rejection of this worldly pride and a focus on a crucified Savior, was a radical call to a different kind of kingdom.

Paul's Journey: God's Provision in Adversity

Paul's path to Corinth, detailed in Acts 16–18, was not a triumphant march but a series of trials that tested his faith and prepared him for the work ahead. His journey began in Troas, where a vision of a Macedonian man led him to Philippi. There, he founded a church with Lydia, a businesswoman who sold purple, but faced severe persecution, being beaten and imprisoned. Enduring hardship in Thessalonica and Berea, Paul finally arrived in Athens. He tried a different strategy, engaging the city's intellectual elite at the Areopagus, using their philosophical framework to present the gospel. Yet, his message about the resurrection of the dead was largely mocked, yielding few converts. Paul left Athens feeling discouraged, alone, and without a clear plan.

It was in this state of weariness that he arrived in Corinth. He didn't arrive as a conquering hero but as a humbled servant, and God, in His perfect providence, had a plan for his weakness. He provided Paul with Aquila and Priscilla, Jewish Christians who had been expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius's decree. As tentmakers, they shared Paul's trade, offering him work, lodging, and much-needed fellowship. This seemingly small provision was a profound act of grace. It grounded Paul's ministry, allowing him to

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preach every Sabbath, earning a living so he would not be a financial burden to the fledgling church. God used Paul's weakness and loneliness as an opportunity to demonstrate His faithfulness, showing that His work is built not on human strength or intellectual prowess, but on His divine provision. This was the foundation of the Corinthian church, one built by a man at his wit's end, sustained by God's grace.

Paul's Relationship with Corinth: A Journey of Grace and Correction

Paul's 18-month ministry in Corinth laid the groundwork for a vibrant yet flawed church, with converts like Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and Gaius, a Roman nobleman. His relationship with the Corinthians extended far beyond his initial stay, marked by multiple letters and visits to address division, immorality, and false teaching. This complex engagement—founding, correcting, confronting, and reconciling—shows Paul's pastoral heart and models the resilience of a fireproof church.

The First Letter (The “Lost Letter”): Before 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote an earlier letter, referenced in 1 Corinthians 5:9: “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators” (KJV). This “lost letter” reveals Paul's early concern for their holiness, urging them to separate from blatant sin. Its absence from the canon suggests it was a specific, timely

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correction, setting the stage for the more comprehensive letter that would follow.

The Second Letter (1 Corinthians): Written from Ephesus around 55 AD, 1 Corinthians responds to reports from Chloe's household about divisions and addresses questions from the church. Paul tackles a wide range of issues, from factionalism and sexual immorality to lawsuits and the proper use of spiritual gifts, all while calling for unity and maturity. This letter establishes the vision of a fireproof church built on Christ crucified.

The Painful Visit: After 1 Corinthians, Paul made an unplanned, "painful" visit to Corinth. He came in "heaviness," likely to confront a specific offender or persistent divisions. This visit was met with resistance, possibly from members who questioned his apostolic authority. The rejection deepened his sorrow, prompting a further letter.

The Severe Letter: Following the painful visit, Paul wrote a "severe letter," mentioned in 2 Corinthians 7:8. Written with anguish and tears, this letter confronted ongoing sin or opposition, possibly from false teachers undermining Paul's apostleship. Its strong message led to repentance among the majority, paving the way for reconciliation.

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2 Corinthians: Written around 56–57 AD, 2 Corinthians reflects Paul’s relief at Corinth’s repentance. In this letter, he defends his apostolic ministry against false apostles, encourages generosity for the Jerusalem collection, and addresses suffering and unity. This letter completes Paul’s journey with Corinth, from correction to restoration, modeling a fireproof church’s endurance.

Paul’s persistent engagement, despite Corinth’s flaws, mirrors God’s grace. His love for the church, through trials and rejection, reflects Christ’s heart for His body.

The Corinthian Church: A Call to Unity

The Corinthian church, though troubled, was a powerful testament to God's power. Paul's ministry there saw the conversion of Crispus, the synagogue leader, and others, despite Jewish opposition. Remarkably, Sosthenes, the new synagogue leader who opposed Paul, was later converted, co-authoring 1 Corinthians. This transformation—from persecutor to partner—illustrates God’s power to redeem even our greatest opponents.

Paul’s first letter to Corinth begins by affirming his calling as an apostle, chosen by Christ on the Damascus road. He addresses the church as “sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints” (1

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Corinthians 1:2, KJV), a powerful reminder of their corporate identity. The Greek word *ekklēsia* (church) means a “called-out assembly,” a community set apart for Christ, not a building or a social club. The term “saints,” always plural in Scripture, reflects the collective holiness of believers, sanctified by Christ’s righteousness. This is a crucial point for a church plagued by division: their primary identity wasn’t as a follower of Paul or Apollos, but as a member of God’s holy, called-out people.

Paul’s plea for unity is urgent: “that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” (1 Corinthians 1:10, KJV). Unity, not uniformity, is the goal, achieved by sharing the mind of Christ. He reminds them that the source of their gifts is Christ, not themselves, and that their calling transcends their individual differences. This unity challenges churches today, which are often split by loyalty to charismatic leaders or political camps, reminding us that Christ alone is our head.

The Call to Be Saints: A Shared Identity in Christ

The Corinthians were divided over personalities, sin, status, and doctrine. Paul’s solution is to root their

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identity in their calling as saints. This calling is not earned but received through faith in Christ.

William Tyndale understood this truth when he labored to translate the Scriptures into English. His most controversial choice was rendering *ekklēsia* not as “church” but as “congregation.” To the authorities, “church” safeguarded the institution—bishops, priests, and hierarchy. “Congregation,” however, emphasized the gathered people of God, ordinary believers called out by Christ. This single word undermined centuries of ecclesiastical control, and for it Tyndale was condemned as a heretic and ultimately martyred.

Tyndale’s witness reminds us that saints are not solitary superstars but a community reflecting Christ’s holiness together. This calling is not contingent on acceptance but on faithfulness. When we share the gospel and face rejection, we are not rejected—God is. This frees us to serve boldly, trusting God’s grace. It is this shared calling that binds a fireproof church together, making it resilient against the forces of division from within and without.

Application: Building a Fireproof Church

A fireproof church is united in its calling to Christ. Here are four ways to apply this truth:

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- **Embrace Your Calling:** Recognize that God has called you to His church, not to try Jesus out but to serve Him faithfully. Your presence in the body is purposeful, equipped by God's gifts for His glory (Ephesians 4:1).
- **Reject Division:** Divisions over preachers, status, or preferences weaken the church. As Paul urges, "be perfectly joined together" in the mind of Christ, found in His Word (1 Corinthians 1:10, KJV).
- **Serve Together:** As saints, we are called to fellowship, not isolation. Support one another, as Aquila and Priscilla supported Paul, and trust God to use you where He places you.
- **Persevere in Faith:** Like Paul through trials, trust God's provision amid rejection or hardship. Share the gospel boldly, knowing He sustains you, and remember that our calling is secure in Him, regardless of the outcome.

Conclusion: A Unified Body

A fireproof church is built on the calling to be saints, united in Christ. Corinth's pagan culture could not extinguish the gospel's light, nor can ours. Let us link arms, love one another, and serve faithfully, knowing that God has called us to His body. As we study 1 and 2 Corinthians, may we learn from Paul's perseverance and build a church that glorifies Christ alone.

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Prayer

Father, we thank You for calling us to be Your saints. Teach us to rest in our calling, reject division, and serve together. Build us into a fireproof church that reflects Your glory. In Jesus' name,

Amen.

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Caption