

Paul's Ministry *in* Corinth



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Cor. 1:1, Gal. 1:1, Acts 17:16–34, 1 Cor. 5:9–11, Acts 18:4–10, 2 Cor. 2:4.*

Memory Text: “One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people’ ” (*Acts 18:9, 10, NRSV*).

The great English missionary William Carey used to say that he cobbled shoes to pay his expenses, but his real business was winning souls.

Likewise, Paul worked as a tentmaker for a living (*Acts 18:1–3*), but his real business was, of course, winning people to Christ.

This week, we will get a glimpse of Paul's ministry to the church in the city of Corinth. The church, as we will see, was full of problems, many that were not unlike what our churches face today, almost two thousand years later. Indeed, anyone who has been in Christianity for any length of time, or who has been involved in church work, could ask the question: Have you ever found a Christian group that doesn't have any problems? The answer is, of course, obvious.

Paul faces challenges in Corinth but does so with the message of the Cross (*1 Cor. 2:2*). Faithfulness to this message is also the way to face the challenges that we have today. As we will see this week and throughout this quarter, the message of 1 and 2 Corinthians applies to our lives, as well.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 4.

Paul, a God-called Apostle of Jesus

Paul begins his letter to the Corinthians by identifying himself as an apostle of Jesus, called “through the will of God” (*1 Cor. 1:1; compare with 2 Cor. 1:1*). His conviction regarding who he is in relation to Jesus is so firm that, with a few exceptions, this is the way he opens all his letters.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:1 and Romans 1:1. What two elements of Paul’s ministry are emphasized in these passages? (See also *Gal. 1:1*.)

Paul speaks of his calling and apostleship as fulfilling God’s will. He is convinced that his calling is not from men but from God (*Gal. 1:1*). Paul was called by God from his mother’s womb like Jeremiah (*Jer. 1:5*) as an act of God’s grace (*Gal. 1:15*), and it happened so that he would proclaim the gospel of Christ among the Gentiles.

In 1 Corinthians 15:8, Paul includes himself among those to whom Christ appeared after the Resurrection (*1 Cor. 15:5–7*). A few verses later, he implies that his calling to be an apostle resulted from that encounter with Jesus (*1 Cor. 15:9–11*).

The title “apostle of Jesus” encompasses a series of concepts. Primarily, it conveys the idea of one whom Jesus sends. Nevertheless, Paul also uses this phrase to identify himself as a servant of Christ (*Rom. 1:1, Titus 1:1, Gal. 1:10*), as well as a preacher and a teacher (*1 Tim. 2:7, 2 Tim. 1:11*). Whether Paul preaches or teaches, Christ is always in evidence. In short, Paul is an apostle of Jesus.

Jesus is not only the center of Paul’s apostleship; He is the center of Paul’s life. Paul’s thoughts and feelings were filled with the presence of Jesus. Evidence of this fact is that he refers to Jesus repeatedly in the opening and in the thanksgiving section of 1 Corinthians (nine times in nine verses). Paul loved Jesus so much that he couldn’t stop thinking and talking about Him. He wanted to share Jesus with those under his care so that their lives would be Christ-centered, too. While he was called to be an apostle, they were called to be faithful followers of Jesus in whatever capacity to which the Lord called them.

Paul was called to be an apostle. What is your calling, and how do you know that it is your calling? If you don’t think you have one, why not go right now and ask Him to show you the work He chose you to do?

From Athens to Corinth

Read Acts 17:16–34. Where was Paul before going to Corinth, and what did he do there?

Acts 17:16–34 describes Paul’s preaching to the Athenians before his going to Corinth. Apparently, he did not plan to visit Athens at that moment, but went there with the help of some friends because of the opposition that he faced at Berea (*Acts 17:13–15*).

Those who went with Paul to Athens returned to Berea with a command for Timothy and Silas to join him as soon as possible (*Acts 17:15*). Acts 17:16–34 is about what Paul does while waiting for them. He speaks about Jesus in the synagogue, the marketplace, and the Areopagus. He really couldn’t stop talking about Jesus and took advantage of every opportunity to do it.

Read Acts 18:1–11. What does Paul do when he arrives at Corinth and during his whole stay in that city?

Paul went to Corinth during his second missionary journey. Luke informs us that Paul stayed there a year and a half.

As usual, Paul begins his missionary activity at the synagogue (*Acts 18:4–6*). Acts 17:1, 2 mentions that this was his custom. He followed the “to-the-Jew-first” strategy (*Rom. 1:16, Acts 13:46*), just as Jesus had commanded His apostles (*see Acts 1:8*).

When finally Silas and Timothy joined him in Corinth, he “was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus” (*Acts 18:5, ESV*). During his stay in Corinth, he was busy “teaching the word of God” (*Acts 18:11, NKJV*). It was in this context, too, that he expressed those famous words that he was “determined not to know anything among” the Corinthians “except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (*1 Cor. 2:2, NKJV*).

What can we learn from Paul’s missionary activity in Athens and Corinth? What makes sharing the gospel so challenging in our cities and communities today? How can we share the gospel with success in these difficult places? What strategies can we learn from Paul’s missionary activity about how to best do that?

The City of Corinth

Read Acts 18:1–3, 1 Corinthians 5:9–11, and 1 Corinthians 8:4. What can we infer about Corinth’s economy, morality, and religious life?

Corinth was an important center of the ancient world, renowned for its prosperous commerce. The city was destroyed by Rome in 146 B.C. and rebuilt by Julius Caesar as a Roman colony in 44 B.C. It is this Roman Corinth that appears in the New Testament. In the time of Paul, Corinth was one of Athens’ rivals and had even surpassed it in various aspects. Corinth had two important harbors that made the exchange of merchandise and the development of its commerce easy.

Indeed, Paul chose Corinth because of its importance and advantaged geographic location. “An opportunity was thus presented for the spread of the gospel. Once established at Corinth, it would be readily communicated to all parts of the world.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, p. 99.

In addition, the flourishing commerce of Corinth would make it easier for Paul to support himself by producing and selling tents while proclaiming the gospel in that city (*Acts 18:2, 3*). Obviously, missionary work in a large and wealthy city is not free of challenges. Corinth was marked by a blatant religious pluralism (*1 Cor. 8:5*), as evident by its numerous shrines built in homage to such deities as Apollo, Athena, and Aphrodite, among others, and even the worship of such Egyptian gods as Serapis and Isis.

In addition to this religious confusion, Corinth was also known for its sexual licentiousness. Strabo, a Greek geographer and historian, mentions that there were 1,000 sacred prostitutes devoted to the worship of Aphrodite in her temple at Corinth. Although many scholars view this with suspicion and connect this claim to Athenian propaganda against Corinth, ritual prostitution was common in the ancient world. Sexual immorality was a problem in Corinth, as elsewhere. Idolatry and immorality were part of daily life, and this sad reality explains much of the content of 1 and 2 Corinthians.

In his missionary activity in Corinth, Paul faced the challenge of an idolatrous and licentious society. What challenges in today’s culture can make it hard to preach the gospel? How can we overcome them? How much difference, if any, is there between Corinth and our cities today?

“Many in This City”

Read Acts 18:4–8. What were the results of Paul’s preaching?

The work of Paul among the Jews at Corinth was not as fruitful as he wanted it to be. He had to face some hostility and hatred. The Bible says that “they opposed him and blasphemed” (*Acts 18:6, NKJV*). When the object of the Greek verb *blasphēmeō* (“to blaspheme”) is a human being, it means “to revile” or “to defame.” In other words, they intended to stain Paul’s reputation and to prevent him from succeeding in his missionary endeavors.

Fortunately, the work of Paul in the Corinthian synagogue was not in vain. After all, God was in charge of this mission. He promised, “[My word] shall not return to me empty” (*Isa. 55:11, ESV*). Some Jews did not expect that Crispus, the synagogue’s ruler, and his entire household would accept Jesus as the Messiah and get baptized (*Acts 18:8*). In addition, “many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized” (*Acts 18:8, NKJV*), very likely also because of the influence of Crispus.

Read Acts 18:9, 10. What can we infer about Paul’s feelings in the face of his challenges in Corinth? How did God encourage His servant?

Right after Paul left the synagogue, he had an experience that brought him encouragement. Christ Himself appeared to him by night in a vision, with words that recall Isaiah 41:10: “Fear not, for I am with you” (*NKJV*). Indeed, Paul admits he was in Corinth “in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling” (*1 Cor. 2:3, NKJV*). He had to depart from Berea to Athens because of staunch opposition. He seems to have thought he would have to leave Corinth for the same reason: great opposition. But that would not happen this time. Jesus said to him: “‘I have many people in this city’” (*Acts 18:10, NKJV*). And Paul was His instrument to take the news of salvation to them.

Read Isaiah 41:10. What wonderful promises does God give you in this verse? What hope do they give you right now in your life?

Paul's Letters to the Corinthians

Read 1 Corinthians 1:11–13; 1 Corinthians 4:14; 1 Corinthians 5:11; 1 Corinthians 7:1; and 1 Corinthians 14:37, 40. Also read 2 Corinthians 1:12, 2 Corinthians 2:9, 2 Corinthians 11:3, and 2 Corinthians 13:10. How do these passages help us understand why Paul wrote letters to the Corinthians?

Paul was in Ephesus when he wrote 1 Corinthians (*1 Cor. 16:5–9*). The family of Chloe went to him with the report that things were not going too well back in Corinth (*1 Cor. 1:11*). In 1 Corinthians 1–6, Paul addresses the issues brought by Chloe's household. The problems include factionalism, sexual immorality, lawsuits, and prostitution. Paul also received a letter with specific questions (*1 Cor. 7:1*). His response fills the space from chapter 7 onward. The questions were related to marriage, divorce, celibacy, food sacrificed to idols, conduct in worship, the use of spiritual gifts, and incorrect understanding of the resurrection. The church of Corinth was very problematic and immature. Perhaps your local church has many problems. Yet the church at Corinth was probably worse.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is very relevant to our time, as well. After all, don't we, to some degree, face some of the same issues in many of our churches today? This letter has much to say to us. It is "one of the richest, most instructive, most powerful of all his letters."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 301.

Paul may have written three or four letters to the Corinthians (*compare with 2 Cor. 10:9*). He wrote an initial letter before 1 Corinthians (*1 Cor. 5:9*), but it is lost. Before 2 Corinthians, he wrote a letter referred to by scholars as the "severe letter" (*2 Cor. 2:3, 4, 9; 2 Cor. 7:8*), but it is lost, too. Some think he is referring to 1 Corinthians, or that this letter is partly preserved in 2 Corinthians.

From 2 Corinthians, we realize that the members of Corinth were influenced by the surrounding culture. They valued such things as competition, power, and wealth, all things that can challenge our church today, as well. Conversely, Paul sought to create a Christ-focused culture, a way of seeing the world through the lens of the gospel. How crucial that we, too, see our present world through the lens of the gospel.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:4 again. What does this verse tell you about how much Paul cared for these people? In contrast, how much love is in your heart for others?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Corinth,” pp. 243–254, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“In preaching the gospel in Corinth, the apostle followed a course different from that which had marked his labors at Athens. . . . He determined to avoid elaborate arguments and discussions, and ‘not to know anything’ among the Corinthians ‘save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 244.

“Paul had a measure of success,” but he “doubted the wisdom of building up a church from the material he found there. He considered Corinth a very questionable field of labor, and determined to leave it. . . .

“As he was contemplating leaving the city for a more promising field, . . . the Lord appeared to him in a vision of the night, and said, ‘Be not afraid, but speak, . . . for I have much people in this city.’ Paul understood this to be a command to remain in Corinth, and a guarantee that the Lord would give increase to the seed sown. . . . A large church was enrolled under the banner of Jesus Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, pp. 106, 107.

“It is recorded that Paul labored a year and six months in Corinth. His efforts, however, were not exclusively confined to that city. . . . He made Corinth his headquarters. . . . Several churches were thus raised up. . . . The absence of Paul from the churches of his care was partially supplied by communications weighty and powerful, which were received generally as the word of God. . . . These epistles were read in the churches.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, p. 109.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Paul was convinced that he was an apostle of Jesus and that this calling was from God. Why is it so important to know who we are and what our call is?
- ❷ For a moment, Paul felt like giving up his missionary work in Corinth and leaving the city. What caused him to change his mind? How can this help us when we feel like giving up a missionary project? Might there be, though, a time we should?
- ❸ The church members in Corinth were significantly influenced by the surrounding culture. This is also a stark reality among us today. How can we be in the world (*John 17:11, 15*) and not be influenced by what “is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life” (*1 John 2:16, ESV*)? What are other ways that our church is being influenced negatively by the surrounding culture?

Return of the Pioneer

By RICK KAJIURA

There is nothing like the thrill of visiting a Global Mission pioneer. Even more exciting is seeing them meeting with their small group of fledgling believers. I remember doing this in a house church up a dusty road in a mountain village in Indonesia and sneaking into a small apartment in a concrete-block building in an eastern European country. I remember the rustling sound of a blue tarp underfoot and over our heads in southeast Asia and seeing a pioneer teaching the Sabbath School lesson under trees in rural Africa.

Yet, the church I visited recently was totally different. The pioneers had left years ago. This time I saw a church building, with a school next door. The church has 125 members, and the school is considered one of the best in the city.

There were no Adventists in this city when the pioneers arrived. They started trying to sell books, canvassing door to door. They tried to rent a place to hold meetings, but people refused to rent to them. They got the message; they weren't welcome in this city.

Instead, they received an invitation to go to a nearby town. There they were able to rent a hall and start work. Before long they had a small group started with five baptized members. Then they were invited to another town, and before long they had a group with 37 members.

It took years before they finally were accepted in the main city and were able to find a meeting place. They started a small group and soon they had 30 members. Since then, this church has given birth to four "baby churches." The small groups in those nearby towns also have grown into full churches, and each of them has started baby churches. One of the original pioneers who helped start these churches returned to visit the area with me. He is now the Adventist Mission director for the region and showed me how God had blessed his efforts through the years.

Pioneers still are going to unreached areas today. Pioneers such as Taguhi and Aghvan are working in an area with very few Adventists. Please pray for missionaries and Global Mission pioneers as they start new work in the 10/40 Window, the large cities of the world, and among post-Christian people. May God bless their work as they share the gospel and start new worshipping groups.

Global Mission pioneers are laypeople sent to start new groups of believers in unreached areas or among unreached people groups. They are paid a small stipend and often work within their own culture. Learn more about Global Mission pioneers: bit.ly/GMPioneers.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Acts 18:9, 10*

Study Focus: *1 Cor. 1:1–3, Acts 18:4–10.*

Introduction

A recent cartoon shows a large older woman sitting in a doctor's office. The doctor has an astonished look on his face. The caption below the cartoon reads: "Doctor, I identify as a slim 16-year-old, and I find it deeply offensive that you say that my weight at my age is threatening my health."

As this cartoon humorously shows, perception is a key part of identity. Entities who struggle to define their identity also will struggle to accomplish their purpose or mission in life.

This week's lesson introduces two mission-driven books of the New Testament: 1 and 2 Corinthians. We are also introduced to the author, Paul himself, particularly his mission and purpose for reaching out to the Corinthians.

Lesson Themes

Beyond an introduction to the background history of the church in Corinth and how it was founded, the lesson will focus on the following issues and themes:

- 1. Cultural and Historical Backdrops.** We will consider the important cultural and historical backdrops relevant for the study of the epistles to the Corinthians.
- 2. Strategic Ministry.** What was Paul's strategy for ministry in Corinth? In pursuit of the answer to this question, we will consider Paul's mission strategy in Corinth within the framework of the early Christian church.
- 3. Identity.** Identity is key to mission. It bears repeating that entities who struggle to define their identity will also struggle to accomplish their mission. Our discussion of identity will seek to answer the following questions:
 - a. Why did Paul identify as an apostle?
 - b. What role does identity play in mission?
 - c. What kind of identity did the church in Corinth have?
 - d. How can we maintain a Christian identity in a world that emphasizes different values and ideals?

Part II: Commentary

1. Background: First Corinthians is one of the longer letters in the New Testament. Like Romans, it consists of 16 chapters, totaling 433 verses. It is a pastoral letter to a recently established church that faces significant ethical, theological, and interpersonal issues. Paul clearly identifies himself as the author of 1 Corinthians (*1 Cor. 1:1*), and in 1 Corinthians 16:21, he includes a reference to his signature by his own hand. Second Corinthians is shorter (13 chapters, totaling 257 verses) and contains much more personal information about the apostle Paul. The epistle describes comprehensively the apostle's understanding of his apostolic ministry. Some have used the Latin phrase *apologia pro vita sua*, “defense of his life,” as an appropriate designation of the content and focus of 2 Corinthians (see Leland Ryken and Philip Graham Ryken, “2 Corinthians: Introduction,” in *The Literary Study Bible: ESV* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2007], p. 1715). In this letter, Paul defends his apostolic ministry to some detractors in the Corinthian church and offers an example of how Christian life and ministry should be lived.

The correspondence between Paul and the young congregation in Corinth has been a matter of scholarly discussion. First Corinthians seems to be an answer to some questions that were sent by mail to Paul (*see, for example, 1 Corinthians 7:1*)—perhaps in response to an earlier letter the apostle had sent that doesn't exist anymore, possibly referenced in 1 Corinthians 5:9. It is possible that there were more exchanges between Paul and the Christian community in Corinth, following that first letter, which are not available to us now.

Presumably, these exchanges would have preceded the second letter, which is now part of our biblical canon. First Corinthians was written about A.D. 55 from Ephesus (compare with “1 Corinthians,” *Andrews Bible Commentary*, ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez et al. [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2022], p. 1613), while 2 Corinthians has a more likely date of A.D. 56.

2. Strategic Ministry in Corinth: Paul's ministry in Corinth is described in Acts 18. The apostle had ministered there for more than 18 months. The ancient city of Corinth had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. and was rebuilt in 44 B.C. by Julius Caesar as a Roman colony. It soon became a significant political and economic center that was strategically located in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Its two ports, Cenchreae in the east and Lechaenum in the west, offered a safe land connection between the Aegean and Ionian seas. Corinth's control of the two harbors and of the road crossing the 6-kilometer-wide isthmus enabled the city to levy taxes on both north-south and east-west trade (compare with Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, “Corinth,” in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of*

the Bible, ed. K. Doob Sakenfeld [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006], vol. 1, pp. 732–735).

The city offered great economic possibilities, and the opportunities for upward social mobility attracted many nationalities. Because it was a relatively young city, Corinth also was less controlled by ancient traditions and more open to new ideas. Rome designated the city as the capital of the province of Achaea, thus underlining its political importance. Paul's strategic decision to invest more than 18 months of his life in ministry in Corinth offers us a good example of his intentional mission planning.

Paul's ministry in Corinth followed a familiar pattern. He was hosted in the city by Aquila and Priscilla, two Jewish Christian converts who had been forced out of Rome by a decree from Claudius, banning all Jews from the city (*Acts 18:2*). Aquila and Priscilla were also tentmakers (*Acts 18:3*). Strategically, Paul visited first the synagogue on Sabbath (*Acts 18:4*) and focused his teaching—when invited to read the weekly readings from the Torah—on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (*Acts 18:5*).

By showing the true interpretation of well-known Messianic texts, Paul was able to engage the Jewish members of the community on familiar ground. Paul's interpretation and preaching, however, often created conflict and tension during his missionary journeys, which led him, in Corinth, to refocus his attention on the "God-fearers." The God-fearers were Gentiles who often resonated with Jewish teachings but who were not proselytes (*see Matt. 23:15*). *Acts 18:7* reports that Paul preached in the house of Titius Justus, a non-Jewish neighbor of the synagogue in Corinth. Among those who were convinced of Paul's preaching was Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, along with his entire house, together with many others (*Acts 18:8*).

3. The Importance of Identity: Identity shapes our beliefs, our understanding of history, and also our own sense of being. After his experience on the road to Damascus (*Acts 9*), Paul's identity is anchored in his divine call to follow Jesus and be an apostle (i.e., an envoy and messenger) of Jesus. Paul, together with his co-author Sosthenes, begins his first letter to the Corinthian church by claiming that he was "called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus" (*1 Cor. 1:1, ESV; compare with 2 Cor. 1:1*). The Greek verb *apostellein*, "to send," underlies the noun *apostolos*, which—surprisingly—is seldom used in Greek literature outside of the New Testament. The use of a relatively rare word to identify a crucial ministry in the early Christian church may have been a conscious attempt to communicate the foundational importance of the ministry of the apostles, as well as the unique function of those who were sent, which, including Paul, went beyond the Twelve, as the reference in Romans 16:7 may suggest:

“Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles” (*NKJV*).

Paul’s identity is rooted in three things: (1) the experience of his calling in which he saw the risen Lord (*1 Cor. 15:8, 9; Gal. 1:15, 16*); (2) his commissioning by God to proclaim the gospel (*Gal. 1:1; compare with Acts 9:15*); and (3) the fruits of his apostolic ministry, represented by converts and new churches (*1 Cor. 9:2*). Acts offers a number of Paul’s testimonies that retell his calling, his commissioning, and his fruit, underlining the importance of these elements for his ministry. While he acknowledges his excellent education at the feet of famous scholars and his membership in the strict sect of the Pharisees, his identity is not based on prestige and accomplishments but on his encounter with Jesus Christ.

Identity seems also to be an important issue in the newly established Corinthian church. Paul reacts strongly to the news that there is division in the congregation in which people now align themselves strongly with several different Christian leaders. Paul reminds his audience that first and foremost, they are followers of Christ, not followers of Paul, Apollos, or Peter (*1 Cor. 1:10–12*). His argument for unity is based on the undividable Christ, His sacrifice, and His saving grace (*1 Cor. 1:13*). We will return to the issue of identity in the Corinthian church in a future lesson, focusing on it in more detail.

Part III: Life Application

Many businesses today spend time and money on the question of branding and self-identity. They realize that, in the competitive business world, just doing what they have always done will not guarantee survival. They need to have a clear vision of who they are and of the unique needs they can meet. Paul, too, seems to have known the importance of identity.

- 1. In your group, explore Paul’s self-identification as an apostle. What did this identity mean, and what right did he have to claim this distinction for himself? How did his apostleship affect his life’s purpose and mission?**

2. Ponder and discuss how our individual, and corporate, identity as Seventh-day Adventist Christians can help us discover, and meet, the needs of our communities.

3. The church at Corinth was a unique cultural blend. Most of the group did not have a Jewish cultural background. They could not be identified as a Jewish offshoot or sect. This lack of a clear identity underlies many of the problems that Paul addresses in the Corinthian church. In your group, discuss the relationship between identity and behavior. Why does knowing who we are, where we come from, and where we are going influence what we do and how we live?

4. Finally, how can we maintain a Christian identity in a world that emphasizes different values and ideals?
