INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF 1 CORINTHIANS

Corinth—The City

Corinth was an unusual city. After its capture by the Roman Legions in 146 B.C., the city was leveled to the ground and lay waste for nearly 100 years until Julius Caesar rebuilt it in 44 B.C. But then it grew rapidly—largely because of its unique geographical location. It lay at the neck of a narrow isthmus that connected the two parts of Greece. Thus it controlled all north-south land traffic. To the east and the west of the city were two fine harbors. Both goods and actual ships were hauled across the 4 mile wide Corinthian Isthmus. Thus Corinth also controlled the sea routes between east and west. All this added up to wealth and influence. By the time of Paul's visit some 100 years after its rebuilding, Corinth had become the capital of the province of Achaia and the third most important city in the Roman Empire—after Rome and Alexandria.

In this wealthy, young city excess seemed to be the norm. The city was stocked with art treasures purchased from around the Empire. It became a center of philosophy—though apparently few citizens were really interested in the serious study of philosophy, preferring rather stirring orations on the faddish topic of the moment delivered by the numerous itinerant philosophers that had been drawn to the city. Even in religion, the same excess was obvious. The Greek author Pausanius describes some 26 pagan shrines and temples including the great temples of Apollo and Aphrodite. In Old Corinth, a thousand temple prostitutes had served Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and New Corinth continued this tradition of sexual freedom. The city developed a world-wide reputation for vice and debauchery.

Luxury was the hallmark of Corinth. Because the storms in the Aegean Sea were so treacherous, sailors preferred to put into one of the harbors and transport their cargo to the other side by land—despite the exorbitant prices charged by the Corinthians. The result was that goods from around the world passed through its ports. This also meant that some 400,000 slaves were kept in Corinth to provide the labor for this arduous job.

Into this new city flowed people from around the Empire. There were "Greek adventurers and Roman bourgeois, with a tainting infusion of Phoenicians; a mass of Jews, ex-soldiers, philosophers, merchants, sailors, freed men, slaves, trades-people, hucksters and agents of every form of vice." (Farrar.) Rootless, proud, independent, egalitarian, individualistic, rich—together they shaped this new city into the cosmopolitan capital that it was in Paul's day. Not surprisingly, it was here that Paul had to fight the battle to prevent Christianity from succumbing to the debilitating enticements offered by Paganism.

Paul and the Corinthians

Paul visited Corinth during his second missionary journey, probably in A.D. 50. Having been in some peril in Macedonia, he fled by ship to Athens (Acts 17:5-15). Not meeting with great success there (Acts 17:16-34), he then journeyed the short distance to Corinth where he met up with Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:1f). At first, he preached in the synagogue with some success (Including winning to Christ the ruler of the synagogue). But then the Jews became resistive and forced him to leave. So he moved next door to the synagogue, into the home of a Gentile. The Jews eventually hauled Paul before the new governor, Gallio, hoping to silence him, but Gallio threw the case out of court as having no merit. After some 18 months (his longest stay anywhere except Ephesus), Paul left and continued his missionary work in Syria.

Two events sparked the writing of 1 Corinthians some three or four years later. First, he heard that there was a divisive spirit loose in the church (1 Corinthians 1:11). Second, he received a letter in which the Corinthians asked him questions about marriage (1 Corinthians 7:1) and other matters. In addition a delegation came from Corinth that filled in his knowledge of the problem there (1 Corinthians 16:15-17). Being unable to visit them personally, he sought to deal with the issues by letter and thus the Corinthian correspondence was begun.

Theme

1 Corinthians is a practical, issue-oriented letter in which Paul tells his readers what they ought to do or not do. Paul's pattern in other letters, typically, is to begin with a strong theological statement and then follow up with insights into how these ideas apply in daily life. But not in 1 Corinthians. Here there is very little direct theological teaching. Rather Paul discusses, in turn, a number of issues of behavior.

The problem was that these proud, (sometimes) wealthy, independent ex-pagans were having a most difficult time learning how to live as Christians. It was at the level of lifestyle that paganism directed its attack on the newly emerging Christian faith. *This is the underlying issue.* Where were the lines to be drawn? How much of one's culture must be abandoned in becoming a Christian? This was a frontal attack on Christianity, which if defeated in Corinth, threatened the existence of the Christian church throughout the Empire. So just as he did in Galatians when the attack was from Judaism (over the issue of the law), Paul strikes back again here in 1 Corinthians decisively, directly without mincing words.

The Structure of 1 Corinthians

The problem in understanding 1 Corinthians is that the reader only has one side of the correspondence—Paul's. One doesn't know with certainty the questions and problems Paul is addressing. These have to be deduced. Still, it is clear that there are two major divisions in the letter. In chapters 1 through 6, Paul responds to four problems which he became aware of through the news he had received. Then in chapters 7 through 15, he responds to a series of specific questions that had been raised in a letter the Corinthians had sent him. An outline of 1 Corinthians looks like this:

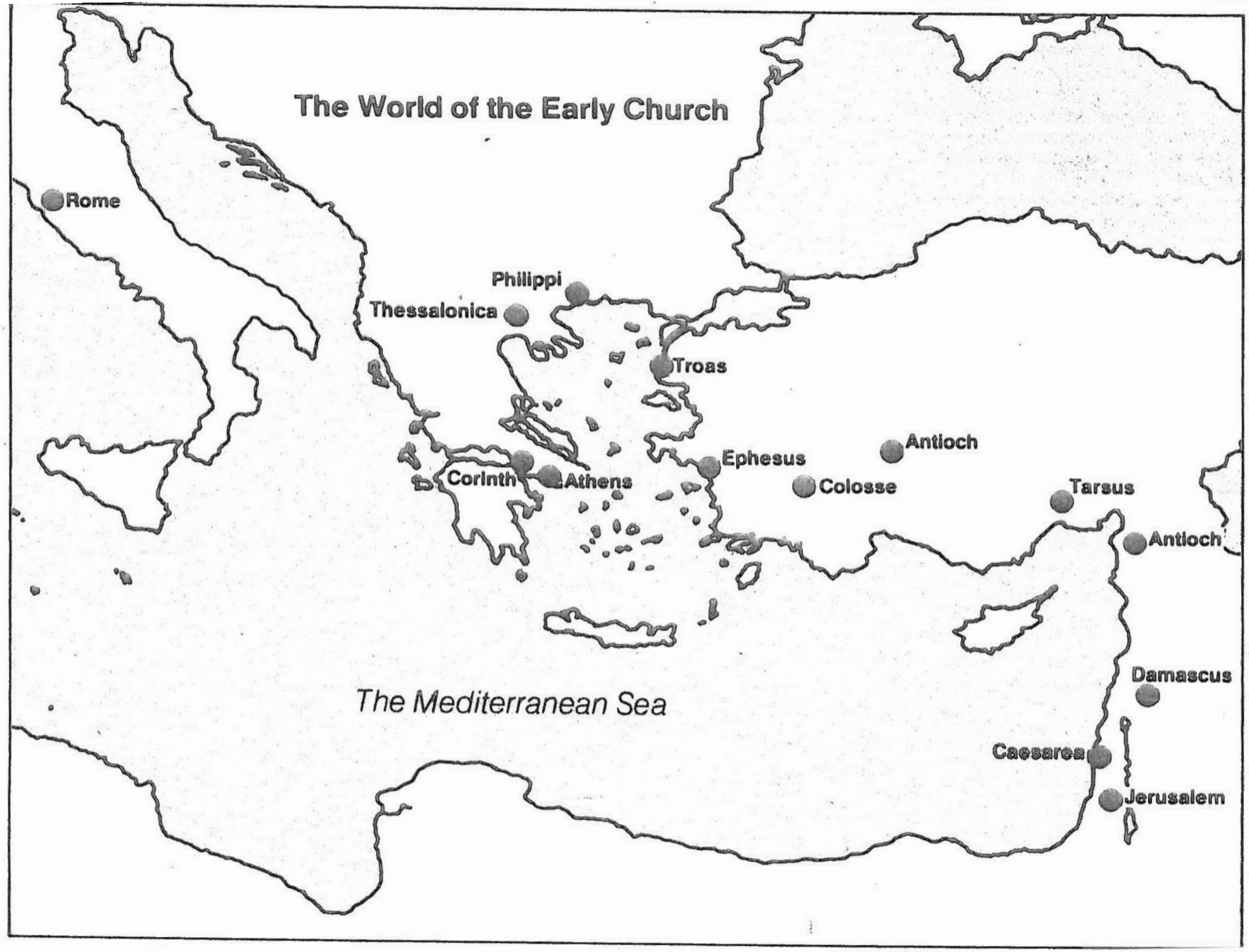
I. Problems Reported to Paul (1:10—6:20)
   A. The Problem of Divisions in the Church (1:10—4:21)
   B. The Problem of Incest (5:1-13)
   C. The Problem of Lawsuits among Believers (6:1-11)
   D. The Problem of Sexual Immorality (6:12-20).

II. Questions Asked of Paul (7:1—15:58)
   A. About Marriage (7:1-24)
   B. About Virgins (7:25-40)
   C. About Food Sacrificed to Idols (8:1—11:1)
   D. About Propriety in Worship (11:2-16)
   E. About the Lord's Supper (11:17-34)
   F. About Spiritual Gifts (12:1—14:40)
   G. About the Resurrection (15:1-58)

In 1:1-9, Paul begins the letter in usual fashion while in chapter 16 he writes a concluding note.

Study Questions

1. Read the story of Paul's stay in Corinth in Acts 18. As you do so:
   (a) Keep a list of all the people he meets there.
   (b) Trace on the map the movements of people in this chapter (e.g. in verses 1 and 5).
   (c) Describe Paul's experience there.
2. Skim 1 Corinthians quickly, using the outline above, in order to get a sense of the whole book.


The World of the Early Church
Rome
Philippi
Thessalonica
Troas
Antioch
Ephesus
Corinth
Athens
Colosse
Tarsus
Antioch
Damascus
The Mediterranean Sea
Caesarea
Jerusalem