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Paul's Corinthian Connections

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Comments in Paul's two epistles to the Corinthians coupled with references to Corinth in the book of Acts reveal an intense, and even complex, level of interaction between Paul and the church he planted in that city. An overview of these Corinthian connections will provide insight into the apostle's activity level and the ongoing care that was necessary for young churches. While some details of these interactions may be impossible to harmonize with absolute certainty, reasonable resolutions are possible and profitable to the student of the New Testament.

Paul's Second Missionary Journey

Paul's first encounter with the city of Corinth took place during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1). During that journey Paul invested 18 months planting a church in Corinth (Acts 18:11). At the end of his time in that city Paul was arraigned on charges of false worship. The proconsul Gallio dismissed these charges (Acts 18:12-17), probably in the year A.D. 51¹, thereby

making further visits by Paul to Corinth possible. Paul then left the city, anticipating ongoing activity in Corinth.

Paul's Hasty Visit to Corinth

During his third missionary journey Paul spent an extended time in the city of Ephesus, and would eventually make a planned visit to Corinth near the end of that journey. However, while Paul was still ministering in Ephesus he made a hasty visit to Corinth, one that is not recorded in the book of Acts and that was likely prompted by some difficulties that had developed in the Corinthian church. Second Corinthians 12:14 and 13:1-2 refer to Paul's intended "third" visit to Corinth, referring to the three-month planned visit that's recorded in Acts 20:2-3. Based on these verses Paul must have made a second visit to Corinth sometime during his time in Ephesus. This second, hasty visit was apparently an occasion in which Paul delivered a harsh warning to the Corinthian Christians regarding some inappropriate aspect of their practices as believers.

Paul's "Lost" Letter to the Corinthians

According to 1 Corinthians 5:9 Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians in which he warned them not to associate with sexually immoral people. It's possible that this verse refers to the earlier part of 1 Corinthians, but many consider it to be a reference to a "lost" letter of Paul.² If a lost letter was involved, such a letter wouldn't have had lasting value to the church and was, therefore, not preserved and likely not inspired as were the canonical epistles.

Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

While ministering in Ephesus, Paul received disturbing news from Corinth about division and sexual immorality in the church (1

Corinthians 1:11; 5:1). He also received written requests for advice on a variety of subjects (1 Corinthians 7:1), possibly carried by Stephanus, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (1 Corinthians 16:15-18). Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus in response to these reports and requests. Paul also sent his ministry partners Timothy and Erastus ahead of him to Macedonia (Acts 19:22) with the possibility that Timothy might go on to Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10-11).

Paul's "Sorrowful" Letter to the Corinthians

Paul refers to a sorrowful letter that he had been compelled to write to the Corinthian Christians, a painful piece of correspondence carried from Paul to Corinth by Titus (2 Corinthians 2:3-4; 7:8-15). This sorrowful letter may actually have been his first epistle, since that letter carries some harsh rebukes. However, the sorrowful letter might have been another private letter that didn't carry enduring, inspired status, written after 1 Corinthians but before 2 Corinthians.³

Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians

Paul was anxious to find out how the Corinthian Christians had responded to his sorrowful letter. Having left Ephesus, he hoped to rejoin Titus in Troas but Titus hadn't yet arrived there with news from Corinth. Therefore, Paul left Troas and traveled to Macedonia (2 Corinthians 2:212-13). In Macedonia Paul met up with Timothy (2 Corinthians 1:1). Soon Titus arrived in Macedonia with good news from Corinth (2 Corinthians 7:5-7). The Corinthians' positive response to Paul's sorrowful letter prompted Paul to write 2 Corinthians from Macedonia, sending Titus back to Corinth with this second canonical epistle in hand (2 Corinthians 8:16-18).

Paul's Final Visit to Corinth

The final recorded visit of the apostle Paul to the city of Corinth took place at the end of his third missionary journey. Having sent 1 Corinthians from Ephesus and 2 Corinthians from Macedonia during that third journey, Paul finally arrived in person at Corinth (2 Corinthians 13:1; Acts 20:2-3). While in Corinth, Paul wrote his epistles to the Romans.

Further Contacts with Corinth

Following Paul's first Roman imprisonment it appears that the apostle traveled to Macedonia again (1 Timothy 1:3), but there is no record of a return to Corinth. Paul did send his colleague Erastus to Corinth about this time (2 Timothy 4:20), indicating that Paul's interest in his fellow believers in Corinth never waned. His commitment to this church was great and his love and prayers for the Corinthians, in spite of their challenges, never faltered. In fact, Paul could honestly write, "Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:28).

¹ Bruce, F. F. *New Testament History*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969, p. 316.

² Mare, W. Harold. "1 Corinthians" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 10. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelein. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976, p. 219.

³ Harris, Murray J. "2 Corinthians" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 10. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelein. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976, p. 309.