



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## **New Testament Survey**

### **Lesson 25 – The Three Great Letters of Paul's Third Mission Journey**

#### **The Three Great Letters**

On Paul's third mission journey he wrote three letters that have become an integral part of our New Testament:

1. During his three years at Ephesus, Paul wrote First Corinthians.
2. When he was in Macedonia on his way to Corinth, Paul wrote Second Corinthians.
3. During his three months at Corinth, Paul wrote Romans to a congregation he had not met.

These three letters teach just about every Christian doctrine.

The letter to the Romans, in particular, is a summary of the main teachings of Christianity. It is the catechism of the Bible. That is why passages from this letter are so often quoted in Christian catechisms and statements of doctrine. Martin Luther said of Paul's letter to the Romans: "This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament and is truly the purest Gospel. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul."

The two letters to the Corinthians, on the other hand, are applications of the Gospel to all kinds of practical problems.

#### **The Background of First Corinthians**

The congregation at Corinth was founded on Paul's second mission journey. He stayed there for a year and a half (see Lesson 22). Among Paul's converts in Corinth were Justus, Crispus, Aquila, and Priscilla.

Various events led up to Paul's writing this letter to the Corinthians:

While Paul was in Antioch in Syria between his second and third mission journeys, Apollos of Alexandria came to Ephesus and was instructed by Aquila and Priscilla.

Apollos went to Corinth from Ephesus and preached the Gospel there with success.

Paul arrived at Ephesus on his third mission journey, and Apollos also returned to Ephesus from Corinth at some time during the next two years (1 Corinthians 16:12).

During his three years at Ephesus, it seems that Paul made a brief trip to Corinth, probably for two reasons (2 Corinthians 12:14; 13:1):

There was a problem of fornication in the congregation.

He made plans for gathering a collection for the Jerusalem Christians.

Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians (which the Holy Spirit did not preserve for us) in which he told them to excommunicate the fornicators from the congregation (1 Corinthians 5:9).

Paul sent Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia and thought that Timothy might also go to Corinth (Acts 19:21-22; 1 Corinthians 4:17). Very likely Timothy did not get there.

Chloe's family came to Ephesus from Corinth and reported terrible problems to Paul (1 Corinthians 1:11):

The congregation was split into four opposing groups:

Paul's group – probably the original members converted by Paul

Apollos' group – probably the members converted or impressed by Apollos

Peter's group – probably transfers from some eastern church

Christ's group – perhaps outsiders who proclaimed Christian freedom to do almost anything, including sin.

A member of the congregation was living in adultery with his own stepmother, and the congregation was doing nothing about it.

Members were suing one another in heathen courts instead of settling their problems within the congregation.

Members were committing adultery with prostitutes.

**In the first six chapters of First Corinthians Paul deals with these problems one by one:**

Divisions in the church – chapters 1-4

The case of incest – chapter 5

Lawsuits of members – chapter 6:1-11

Adultery with prostitutes – chapter 6:12-20

**The more responsible members at Corinth wrote a letter to Paul in which they asked him questions about various problems (1 Corinthians 7:1):**

Marriage questions, such as:

Should Christians be married?

May Christians divorce their spouses?

What about mixed marriages between Christians and non-Christians?

What about the unmarried girls?

Is it advisable to remarry when one's spouse dies?

Eating meat offered as sacrifice to idols

Should pastors have other jobs?

The role of women in the church services

Some women were refusing to wear the customary head covering.

The proper celebration of the Lord's Supper

It seems they had a common potluck meal<sup>1</sup> called the love feast together with the Lord's Supper. But some went away hungry, others got drunk, and they were split into factions or cliques.

What are the best spiritual gifts, and how are they to be used?

Examples of gifts: the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge  
faith, gifts of healing, working of miracles  
prophecy, discerning of spirits  
kinds of tongues, interpretation of tongues

How to conduct the church services:

There was complete disorder; some women were taking over the leadership.

Will there be a resurrection of the dead bodies?

Some of the Corinthians members were denying or doubting this teaching.

The gathering of a collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul discussed all these matters in chapters 7-16 of 1 Corinthians.

Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, members of the Corinthian congregation, delivered the letter from the church in Corinth to Paul in Ephesus and added their own oral report.

At Easter time in 54 or 55 A.D. Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians to give God's answers to all these problems.

### **Some Likely Dates in New Testament History**

Pentecost – 33 AD

Paul's conversion – 36 AD

Paul's first mission journey – 45-48 AD

The council in Jerusalem – 49 AD

Paul's second mission journey – 49-51 AD (chiefly in Corinth)

Paul's third mission journey – 52-55 AD (chiefly in Ephesus)

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<sup>1</sup> A "potluck" is a shared meal where each invited family brings a prepared dish to share.

Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea – 55-57 AD

Paul's voyage to Rome – 57-58 AD

Paul's imprisonment in Rome – 58-60 AD

Paul's last mission journeys – 60-67 AD

Paul's execution – 67 or 68 AD

### **Questions**

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1. What makes Paul's letter to the Romans different from most Bible books?
2. Where was Paul when he wrote his letter to the Roman Christians?
3. Why did Paul write his first letter to the Corinthians?
4. How did Paul learn about the problems in the congregation at Corinth?
5. Where was Paul when he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians?
6. Which of the problems in Corinth are of major concern in your locale today?