

Paul and the Corinthians. The Paul–Corinthian relationship, spanning seven years, three personal visits and four letters, is one of the most complex topics in the New Testament.

Stage One Paul visits Corinth where he settled down for about a year and a half (A.D. 50–52; Acts 18:1–18).

Stage Two About A.D. 52 Paul left Corinth to visit Jerusalem and then Antioch. From there he went to Ephesus and set up his base of operations. During this three-year period Paul wrote the Corinthians three letters and made his second visit to the city.

Stage Three Somewhere between A.D. 52 and 53 Paul wrote the first (**letter #1**) of four letters to Corinth, commonly called the “previous letter.” 1 Corinthians 5:9: “I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people.”

Stage Four In 1 Corinthians 7:1 Paul refers to a letter that the Corinthian church sent to him sometime between A.D. 53 and 54 (“Now for the matters you wrote about”). The concerns raised by the ecclesia in their letter to Paul are addressed in 1 Corinthians 7–16, prefaced by the phrase *now about (peri de)*. These concerns included questions about celibacy and marriage (7:1–40), meat offered to idols (8:1–9:27; 10:23–32) etc.

Stage Five In the spring of A.D. 54 Paul responded to the Corinthians’ letter with our 1 Corinthians (**letter #2**). In addition to the questions the Corinthians raised through official sources (7:1; 16:17), Paul also received news of a more disturbing nature through unofficial sources (“Chloe’s household,” 1:11; “I hear that,” 11:18). There are reports of incest (5:1–12), lawsuits (6:1–11) etc.

Stage Six The relationship between Paul and the ecclesia deteriorated and this resulted in

what is usually called Paul’s “painful visit” in the summer or fall of A.D. 54 (2 Cor 2:1; 12:14, 21; 13:1–2). It was painful because someone insulted him and challenged his authority (13:3). The ecclesia, meanwhile, sat by and did nothing to support Paul. After issuing a strong rebuke (13:2), Paul returned to Ephesus, abandoning his plan to visit the Macedonian churches, revisit Corinth (1:16) and then go on to Jerusalem with the collection for the poor.

Stage Seven When Paul returned to Ephesus, he wrote the church a “severe letter” by means of which he hoped to avoid another painful encounter with them (2 Cor 1:23). In it he rebuked them for not coming to his aid when publicly confronted, tested their obedience to apostolic authority and called them to show their loyalty by punishing the individual who had challenged him (2:1–11; 7:8–13). This was a difficult letter for Paul to write “out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears” (2:4). Some argue this letter is 1 Corinthians; others argue it has not been preserved (**letter #3**)

Stage Eight In 55 Paul left Ephesus to preach in Troas (2 Cor 2:12). Along the way he and his traveling companions had a near-death experience in the province of Asia (1:8), where they “despaired even of life” (1:8–9). After being “delivered . . . from such a deadly peril” (1:10), Paul and company made their way to Troas. But in spite of what looked to be a promising preaching venture, Paul became too anxious about the Corinthian response to his severe letter to continue (2:12–13). Titus was apparently supposed to meet him in Troas, and when he did not come, Paul went on to Macedonia in the hopes of hearing news of him and his Corinthian mission (2:13).

Stage Nine Paul did finally meet up with Titus somewhere in Macedonia. The news Titus brought regarding the Corinthian church was both good and bad. The good news was that the Corinthians had obeyed Paul’s command to punish the “offender” (2 Cor 2:5–11; 7:6–16) and in this way demonstrated their loyalty to Paul. The bad news was twofold; criticisms were being leveled against him on two fronts. First, the Corinthians were charging him with fickleness in arranging his travel plans—saying yes to paying them a return visit only to change his mind at a later point (1:12–2:4). They also accused him of professional arrogance while he lacked appropriate credentials (3:1–4:5). Second, Paul was being attacked by a group of itinerant Jewish Christian preachers who were trying to erode his authority at Corinth by saying that he did not measure up to the standards one would expect of a genuine gospel minister (12:11–13). [See handout to talk #4 for further details of accusations].

Paul responds to these charges with our canonical 2 Corinthians [letter #4], written in either the fall of A.D. 55 or 56 .

Stage Ten In the winter of A.D. 56 Paul made a third and final visit to Corinth. The account in Acts 20:2–3 states that he “arrived in Greece, where he stayed for three months.” The length of Paul’s stay suggests that 2 Corinthians had been successful. Paul’s statement in Romans 15:26 (written during his stay in Greece) that “Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” implies this as well.