



PART 2

PAUL IN CORINTH: LEADERSHIP UNDER FIRE

Chapter Five

The chief consequence of the uprising was that Sosthenes (who evidently had succeeded Crispus as ruler of the synagogue when Crispus became a Christian), received a beating before the *bema* at the hands of the local Greek community ([v. 17](#)).

[Acts 18:17 \(NASB\)](#)

¹⁷“And they all took hold of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and *began* beating him in front of the judgment seat. But Gallio was not concerned about any of these things.”

That may have been an indication of the remarkable acceptance and trust the apostle Paul had earned even among the pagans in Corinth. (Amazingly, sometime after this episode, even Sosthenes apparently embraced the gospel and became a fellow worker with Paul [[1 Corinthians 1:1](#)]).

[1 Corinthians 1:1 \(NASB\)](#)

¹“Paul, called *as* an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother.”

Therefore, Luke says, Paul remained in Corinth “a good while” ([Acts 18:18](#)).

[Acts 18:18 \(NASB\)](#)

¹⁸“Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow.”

He was pastoring the church he founded. Only in Ephesus did Paul serve more time as pastor. The Corinthian church was therefore uniquely Pauline, especially and personally indebted to the great apostle for his leadership. They knew him well and had every reason to trust him, revere his influence, and remain loyal to him and his teaching.

PROBLEMS IN THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH

Nonetheless, after Paul left Corinth, numerous and serious problems developed in the church there requiring skilled and strong leadership. When news of the problems reached Paul, he could not personally return to Corinth immediately, so he endeavored to lead them from a distance with a series of letters. We know that at least one letter from Paul to the Corinthians preceded the canonical first epistle, because Paul himself refers to that letter in [1 Corinthians 5:9 NASB](#), saying, **“I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people.”**

That note of caution may have been the only significant point Paul addressed in that letter, because its contents are otherwise lost. He also seems to refer to another non-canonical epistle in [2 Corinthians 2:4](#), which he wrote **“out of much affliction and anguish of heart.”**

[2 Corinthians 2:4 \(NASB\)](#)

“For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you.”

Those letters (although they certainly must have contained authoritative apostolic admonitions uniquely for the church at Corinth) were never meant to be part of Scripture for the church universal. The proof of that fact is that they were not preserved.

Paul’s New Testament letters to the Corinthians are two comprehensive books about church life. Their implications for leadership are profound.

The first epistle makes it clear from the beginning that in Paul’s absence, serious leadership problems had arisen in Corinth. The church was dividing into factions. People were saying, **“I am of Paul,”** or **“I am of Apollos,”** or **“I am of Cephas,”** or **“I am of Christ”** ([1 Corinthians 1:12 NASB](#)).

That spirit of division and conflict shredded the unity of the church, driven by envy, strife, and carnality ([1 Corinthians 3:3](#)).

[1 Corinthians 3:3 \(NASB\)](#)

“For you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?”

The problem did not stem from any failure in the leadership of Paul, Apollos, or Cephas (Peter). They were all godly men who labored as one for the same goals ([v. 8](#)) and all shared the same convictions (though they had differing leadership *styles*).

[1 Corinthians 3:8 \(NASB\)](#)

“Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.”

The problem was carnality in the church, and Paul expressly said so ([v. 4](#)).



1 Corinthians 3:4 (NASB)

⁴“For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not *mere* men?”

However, the division in the church reflected a serious leadership *vacuum* that had arisen in Corinth. After Paul’s departure, Apollos had capably led that church for a season ([Acts 18:27–28](#); [Acts 19:1](#)). But Apollos had also moved on to other mission fields, and sometime after that is when the factions arose.

Acts 18:27-28 (NASB)

**²⁷“And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace,
²⁸for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.”**

Acts 19:1 (NASB)

¹“It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples.”