

*1 Corinthians***PREFACE**

Few portions of God's word are as timely and pertinent to our own time as Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth.

The epistles in the NT are not form letters. Each letter, like those to whom each was written, has its own personality and purpose. Just as churches have different personalities, the letters written to them have different personalities. Based on those respective personalities and the different situations being addressed, each letter has its own reason for being.

For example, when we studied the letter to the Hebrews—a letter *not* written by the apostle Paul, in my opinion—we discovered that it was less correspondence than the text of a *sermon*, to be read to the congregation *as* a sermon (a position put forward by the respected scholar William L. Lane).

The best way to understand the three letters to the Corinthian church (of which we have only the last two in our canon) are as Paul's side of a *conversation or dialogue*—in fact, repeatedly they have the nature of an *argument*, rather than an affable conversation. The Corinthians quarreled with Paul just as they quarreled with each other:

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-11.

In a manner of speaking the Corinthians had put Paul on trial—at the very least comparing him to other ministers of the gospel—so he had to defend himself to them:

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1, 4-5.

At times Paul had to speak harshly, even sarcastically to them in an effort to make his point about their behavior, as he does later in Chapter Four:

Read 1 Corinthians 4:8, 10, 14.

Unlike other churches he founded, the Corinthian church did not always like his counsel, but tended to argue with him over details. Thus the tone of much of the letter before us is, as Gordon Fee points out, "especially rhetorical and combative."

So we must ask the inevitable question: Why? In some letters Paul scolds the parishioners (as he does as early as v6 in his letter to the Galatians), but in those letters we are left with the impression that those being scolded will honor his counsel. Not so the Corinthians. Here we need not rely on our impressions; it is clear from the text that Paul must repeatedly cover the same territory to convince them—or, as in Chapter Five, correct their misinterpretation of what he had written them earlier.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:9-11.

So again, Why must Paul work so hard at it with the Corinthians? To answer that we must look not just at the members of the Corinthian church, but at the city of Corinth itself.

FROM THESSALONICA TO CORINTH

While it was not the reason for choosing this letter for our next study, it is a moment of pleasant serendipity that with this we continue Paul's second missionary journey after leaving Thessalonica.

Itinerary (See handout Map 1)

Paul lands in Macedonia at Neapolis and travels to Philippi where he establishes the first European church.
Driven from Philippi, he continues on to Amphipolis, then Apollonia, then to Thessalonica.
Leaving Thessalonica after just a few months Paul travels to Berea and then boards a ship to run down the coastline of Macedonia and Achaia, around the horn to Athens.
After a rather unpleasant stay in Athens, Paul leaves and travels to Corinth—probably in AD 50—where he is encouraged by the presence of fellow believers, such as Priscilla and Aquila, who were Jews and, probably, already Christians.
While in Corinth Paul writes the two Thessalonian letters.
A couple of years later while in Ephesus, during his third missionary journey, Paul writes the first (lost) Corinthian letter.

THE CITY AND IT'S PEOPLE

Location and City (See handout Maps 2 & 3)

Corinth was ideally situated on the narrow land bridge (or isthmus) that connected Peloponnesus and mainland Greece. As the apostle could personally attest, it could be a treacherous journey to sail around the cape of the Peloponnese (Acts 27). As a safer alternative an overland, four-mile rock-cut track had been built around 600 B.C. to connect the two ports, so that cargo and even small ships could be hauled across the isthmus to the opposite gulf. The city of Corinth controlled this traffic, and thus was a natural crossroad for land and sea travel. (Later, as we can see from the satellite image—Map 4—a canal replaced the rock causeway.)

In the modern photo we see a portion of Corinth as it is today. In the background is the rocky butte called the Acrocorinth, atop which would have been the temple to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of sexual love and beauty, but also goddess of the sea and of seafaring (*Britannica*).

Licentious Corinth?

We must not make the popular mistake of seeing the city of Corinth as a veritable cesspool of licentious behavior. It is true that it was a cosmopolitan seaport, with a heady mix of religions and cultures as they flowed over and around the isthmus. The city was imbued with Roman cultural values, and those values certainly did not reflect a pious Christian culture. David Garland tells us that “the denizens of Corinth in Paul’s day were known for their wealth and ostentation.” It was indeed, as Fee writes, “at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world.”

But much of its reputation as a sexual cesspool is based on erroneous ancient scholars, such as Strabo, as well as the difference between the earlier *Old* Corinth, and the New Corinth in place in Paul's time. Here is what Fee writes about the earlier city.

Old Corinth had gained such a reputation for sexual vice that Aristophanes (ca. 450-385 B.C.) coined the verb *korinthiazō*, to act like a Corinthian, i.e., to commit fornication. The Asclepius room in the present museum in Corinth provides mute evidence of this facet of city life; here on one wall are a large number of clay votives of human genitals that had been offered to the god for the healing of that part of the body, apparently ravaged by venereal disease.

Sexual sin in the New Corinth was no doubt in abundance, but only of the same kind one might expect in any seaport where money flowed freely and women and men were available. This was the city in which this church was founded and struggled with Christ-likeness. To grasp the challenge, contrast the difference in background and philosophies of the members of a young evangelical church in downtown San Francisco to one in the rural Midwest.

Corinth was a religious and cultural melting pot, and, under Roman rule, was "arguably the most dazzling and modern of Greek cities" (Savage). It was a mercantile society; its culture was one of "trade, business, entrepreneurial pragmatism in the pursuit of success" (Thiselton). As Garland points out,

Few Christians could have been unaffected by the dominant culture surrounding them, even if they assimilated its values only subliminally. Most, if not all, of the problems that Paul addresses [in this letter] were hatched from the influence of this setting.

Even so, we must not fall into the easy habit of blaming our environment for the condition of our heart. The problem for the Corinthian church, and for Paul as he ministered to it, "was not that the church was in Corinth, but that too much of Corinth was in the church" (Garland, after Fee).

UNDERSTANDABLE SLOW CHANGE

So, like every one of us sitting here today, the members of the Corinthian church came to Christ carrying baggage—some a little, some quite a lot—that they had picked up along their way to Him. The older they were at the time, the more baggage they carried.

As we launch into this study of First Corinthians let us not be too quick to judge harshly the members of its church.

- Unlike many of us, none of them had benefit of believing parents who had nurtured them with the truth of God's word—there was no Bible for them; at best, for the Jews in that congregation, they would have heard readings from the ancient Torah at the local synagogue.
- In fact, it would be extraordinary, and pretty much impossible for *any* in that church to have had Christian parents, for it was earlier in this same trip (Paul's second missionary journey) that Paul preached for the *first time* in the European region—in Philippi—and established there the first European church.
- Their daily working environment was a cosmopolitan, seacoast city thoroughly commercialized; business, profit—this was the leading “religion” in the city, and many in the church had benefited from the wealth and affluence this offered.
- As to more traditional religions, the city was a veritable stew. Worshipped there were Apollo, Aphrodite/Venus, Asclepius, Athena, Dionysius, Ephesian Artemis, Hermes/Mercury, Jupiter, Poseidon/Neptune, Fortuna and Zeus—not to mention the pervasive, government mandated imperial cult, the deification and worship of the Roman emperor. (Christians and Jews in that time and place were considered “atheists” for believing in only one God.) For several generations of Corinth's citizens since its re-founding by Julius Caesar in 44 BC, this was the normal way of things. Imagine having a stranger from a distant land teach that all of what you had grown up with was wrong, and that a Jew named Jesus had died for your sins, and His way was the only way to worship the one true God. This sort of transformation does not take place overnight!

So we can cut the Corinthians some slack when we consider the problems of faith and Christian living they were experiencing.

Next week: A look at the issues Paul addresses in this letter.

