

Introducing 1 Corinthians

Imagine a church deeply divided, in which powerful leaders promote themselves against each other. These leaders would have had followers who met with them in the homes of various church members. One of the leaders was having an affair with his step-mother. Instead of disciplining him, many in the church supported him, saying that in Christ he was free to act in such a way. Members were suing other members in the secular courts. Some were visiting prostitutes. As a backlash against this immorality others in the church were promoting complete sexual abstinence for all believers and saying this is the Christian ideal. They also argued about how they should break with their non-Christian past and disagreed about the role of men and women within the church. At their meetings there were divisions about how to exercise prophetic ministries and the gift of speaking in tongues. On top of all of this there were a number of people within the church who didn't believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ.

Because we have access to Paul's mail, we know that there was a church like this in the first century. It was the Church in the city of Corinth. Between now and June our study will focus on 1 Corinthians. This Fall we will be examining chapters one to four and in the new year we will look at chapters 5-16.

This morning I want to introduce you to Corinthians by highlighting three things. The city of Corinth; the Christians in Corinth; and the heart of the problem that prompted Paul to write it.

The City of Corinth: The city of Corinth was completely destroyed in 146 B.C. by the Roman general L. Mummius. For 100 years it lay in complete ruins, but then was refounded by Julius Caesar in 64 B.C. The new settlers were veterans, freemen, and slaves. An era of phenomenal growth and prosperity ensued. Caesar Augustus, Julius' grand nephew made Corinth the capital of the Province of Achaia and the residence of the Proconsul. (The Proconsul was like the Premier of the Province)

Corinth was one of the most popular cities in the world of Paul's day. Today Corinth only has approximately 20,000 people in it. But in Paul's time, it was estimated to have a population of approximately 200,000. Corinth got its size from a very thriving cargo business. It was located near the southern end of the narrow Isthmus joining the Adriatic and Aegean Seas. Therefore it had two ports for commerce. One on the gulf

of the Adriatic Sea and the other on the gulf of the Aegean Sea.

Being full of such a big business and so many people, Corinth experienced some "big city" problems. With many nationalities and sailors coming through town, it resulted in a morally corrupt urban centre. Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Christians had to deal with the influence of this immorality on his congregation.

Since Corinth was commercially oriented, it became famous for certain products: pottery, brass, capitals and pillars. They were proud of their city and adorned it. Corinth was noted for the place where the Isthmus Games were held (they were held every two years and were second in renown only to the Olympic Games held every four years). Athletes were a common sight in Corinth. Hence the reference to the games in chapter 9 of 1Corinthians where Paul asks "Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. 25 Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.

Corinth was famous for its party life. It was an ancient Los Vegas or New Orleans. The word "Corinthian" became a synonym for a hell raiser. To "Corinthianize" meant to engage in prostitution. To "live as a Corinthian" was to live in affluence and immorality. The immorality of Corinthian life was further cultivated by the worship of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Temples to other gods also abounded: Athena, Apollo, Poseidon, Hermes, etc.

In summary Corinth was a busy, thriving, affluent, proud and permissive city. Merchants and sailors, pilgrims and athletes, tourists and prostitutes jostled one another in its narrow streets.

Yet in this heathen city there lived a small group of people whom Paul called the church of God in Corinth. The divine community in the human community. The Anglican priest and theologian John Stott says "the Church was like a fragrant flower growing in and out of the smelly mud."¹

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The Founding of the Congregation in Corinth:² Luke explains the founding of this congregation in Acts 18. Paul had planted the church during his second missionary journey soon after preaching up the coast a bit in Athens. Soon after arriving in Corinth Luke tells us at verse 2 "There Paul found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them,³ and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together-by trade they were tentmakers."

As was his custom Paul began by preaching Christ to the local Jews in their synagogue. We read in verses 4-7: "⁴ Every Sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.⁵ When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with proclaiming the word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus.⁶ When they opposed and reviled him, in protest he shook the dust from his clothes and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."⁷ Then he left the synagogue and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God; his house was next door to the synagogue." Although most of the Jewish population rejected Paul's message we are told at verse ⁸ "Crispus, the official of the synagogue, became a believer in the Lord, together with all his household; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptized." (Crispus' position as the synagogue official would have been as a lay leader who aided the rabbi in conducting services and would have served as a kind of chairman of their elder board or what we would call vestry). We can conclude from these verses that the majority of people who made up the church in Corinth were Gentiles and would therefore have no understanding of the God of Israel, having come out of backgrounds where they worshipped the pantheon of Greek and Roman gods.

We read in verses 9-11 "One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent;¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people."¹¹ He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them." Out of obedience to Jesus Paul ended up staying at Corinth substantially longer than he had at any other city he had evangelized to date.

²I am thankful to Craig Blomberg for his commentary on 1 Corinthians in the NIV Application Series for much of the material that follows.

During this time, some of the Jews who had rejected Paul tried to get him imprisoned by Gallio, the Roman Proconsul of the Province of Achaia. Gallio recognized that Paul and his message posed no legal threat to Rome and refused to take action. Gentile anti-Semitism, never far from the surface in the ancient world, swelled up in response, as some in the crowd used Gallio's acquittal as a pretext to attack the Jewish authorities who had harassed Paul. Luke tells us this in verses 12-17:

"But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal. ¹³ They said, "This man is persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law." ¹⁴ Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of crime or serious villainy, I would be justified in accepting the complaint of you Jews; ¹⁵ but since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves; I do not wish to be a judge of these matters." ¹⁶ And he dismissed them from the tribunal. ¹⁷ Then all of them seized Sosthenes, the official of the synagogue, (he must've taken over from Crispus) and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of these things."

We know that because Gallio was only Proconsul for a little over a year, sometime around 51-52 AD this is when Paul founded the church in Corinth. It was about three years later, while at Ephesus, that he wrote the letter we have called 1 Corinthians. I want to conclude this morning by telling you something about the heart of the Corinthians problem that motivated Paul to write to them.

The Heart of the Problem: Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:11: "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters." As we study the letter it appears that their disunity was marked by a recurring arrogance and immaturity. As is often the case, the most immature often think they are quite mature. In a passage dripping with sarcasm, Paul exclaims "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! (4:8a) And lest anyone not catch the tone of his words he goes on to say more sorrowfully, " Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you! (4:8b). Related to this arrogance and immaturity was the natural human tendency to play down the challenge of the Gospel and to over-emphasize its comfort.

The role of patrons as the power brokers of the Corinthian church points to another factor into their cluster of problems. Rather than exercising a cross focused, Christ

centred model of leadership the wealthy continued to try and buy the friendship of the lower classes, enhance their reputation through litigation.

However, the biggest problem that faced the Corinthian's understanding were ideas they carried over from their non-Christian past. There was a dualism between the material and spiritual worlds. What I mean by this, was a belief held by many, that only the spiritual world was good and redeemable, the physical world was inherently evil. This led to the question, what was to be done with bodily appetites and desires? A majority of the philosophers tried to deny them and abstained from enjoying any of the pleasures of life because they saw them as evil. A majority of the common people took the opposite tack and indulged in them. If matter was by nature irredeemable, if religion was primarily or exclusively a matter of spirit, then why not enjoy sensual pleasures while one could.

It will be important to keep this dualism in mind because part of the division in the church resulted from those who affirmed abstinence over against those who preached license.

In conclusion we see that the heart of the division that Paul addresses in Corinth resulted from a church made up primarily of Gentile believers who living in a city like Corinth were still being influenced more by the values around them than they were by the Gospel. Just as Paul wanted them to come to understand and practice their life as a community rooted in a Christ-centred, cross governed theology, so do I. It is my prayer that as we come to understand this letter better it will shape our thinking in such a way that we become more united and focused in knowing what it means for us to be like a fragrant flower growing in and out of the smelly mud.