

Corinth—Known for Immorality

Corinth was a major city in Greece in the first century that was known for its moral corruption. There was actually a word coined in Greek which translated was “to behave like a Corinthian” which meant immorality and drunken debauchery. In 1 Cor. 6:9-10, Paul listed the typical lifestyle in Corinth—pornography, idolatry, homosexuality, stealing, drunkenness, swindling, and sexual sin of every kind. The problem with the young church there in 55 AD was that they had not moved past this lifestyle. They were even involved in sins that “even pagan Gentiles didn’t commit” like incest (5:1).

Corinth was Paul’s last “church planting” stop on his second missionary journey recorded in Acts 16-18. He came into the city about 51 AD “in fear and trembling” because he had been persecuted in Philippi, Berea, and Thessalonica, and now he was alone entering the wildest city in the kingdom. He met Aquila and Priscilla, fellow Jewish believers from Rome who were also tentmakers like Paul. He made a living while in Corinth making tents. He preached every Sabbath in the Synagogue there reasoning with the Jews that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Many Jews believed in Jesus including Crispus the leader of the Synagogue (Acts 18:8) which caused “many of the Corinthians” to believe in Jesus. This provoked the Jews who rejected him to rise up against Paul and drag him off to the proconsul of Achaia, and accuse him of “persuading men to worship God contrary” to their religion. The proconsul was irritated at such charges and drove them away. The Greeks who there hearing this nonsense before the proconsul, grabbed the leader of the accusers, and beat the snot out of him. The amazing thing about this event is that the accuser who got beat up was named Sosthenes. Luke, the author of Acts usually named such minor characters only if they were still around and had a role in the church. Amazingly enough, Sosthenes was later converted to Christ and was accompanying Paul on his 3rd missionary journey in Ephesus when Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. Paul mentioned him in 1 Cor.1:1 as a co-contributor to the letter. Apparently that beating was the best thing that ever happened to Sosthenes.

Paul ministered successfully in Corinth for 18 months before he returned to Antioch, Syria. An important Christian evangelist named Apollos went to Corinth after Paul left and had a very successful ministry there also. Later, on Paul’s third missionary journey, Paul stopped at the main city in Asia Minor, Ephesus for a stay of 2-3 years. While he was there, Paul received word from one of the Christians in Corinth that some severe problems had developed in the church there. Divisions in the church threatened to break it up, and even worse, immoral behavior was the norm. Not long after that, a delegation from the church at Corinth brought a letter to Paul with numerous questions about important issues like marriage and divorce,

idolatry, Christian liberty, women's rights, the Lord's Supper, the use of spiritual gifts, and the resurrection. Therefore Paul wrote The First Letter to the Corinthians in response to all these issues.

Can of Worms in Corinth

Imagine a church full of clicks, wracked by divisions. One group follows one minister, while another group will only listen to a certain teacher, and in all there are at least four major divisions within the church. None of the members are distinguishable from the world around them. In a world that is punishing Christians, there is no evidence to convict them. One guy is sleeping openly with his stepmother. Many Christians are suing each other, and most visit with prostitutes. Debates rage about women's role in the church. People are babbling in unknown tongues that no one understands, and it is disruptive. All are arrogant and prideful. They desire only the prestigious spiritual gifts, and no one wants to serve. When they come together for communion, instead of drinking the little thimble of wine, they drink the entire carafe and get drunk. They eat all the bread before everyone gets a piece. Jealousy and strife are common. If all that is not enough, there are false teachers in the church denying the bodily resurrection of Christ.

Each of these things is currently happening in various churches in America today, yet the church in Corinth had the entire load. Now some of you are wondering how to get to Corinth because this is your kind of place, exciting and active (just kidding); but Paul found it necessary to write this letter of admonishment and correction. These letters were hand written and hand delivered so typically a church would have only one copy, and the leaders would read the letter out loud to the church during their weekly gathering on Sunday. Can you imagine the looks on their faces when this scathing "come to Jesus" letter was read? I would love to have been a fly on the wall.

Controversial and Misinterpreted

First Corinthians is considered Paul's most controversial letter, and often misinterpreted by people who are not interested in being corrected. It is a hotbed of difficult issues: Are there carnal Christians? What about Christian Discipline on sinners? What about homosexuality, lawsuits, divorce and remarriage, Christian liberty, women's rights, speaking in tongues, and the resurrection? This is why ministers typically steer clear of this letter, or at best tiptoe through it.

The Good News and the Bad News

In 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 Paul gave the church at Corinth the good news, then the rest of the letter is the bad news. The good news is information that is relevant to all Christians. We

have received and believed in the truth from God that has saved us from the penalty of sin. In that sense we all share the common bond of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul said it well in Ephesians 4:4-6, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all." Paul told the Corinthians that all of them had been sanctified in Christ, meaning that God had set them apart from the world as His possession. All believers are owned by God, bought and paid for by the blood of Christ. We all have to continue living in this world for a time, but we are citizens of Heaven. We are in the world but not of the world. Paul went further to say that they were saints along with all people everywhere who have called upon Jesus as their Lord (1 Cor.1:2). Normally you think of a saint as someone who was a famous do gooder who is elected to that office after they die, but the New Testament uses the term for all believers. It literally means we are "holy ones" in God's eyes based on the atoning work of Jesus on the cross on our behalf. Now when God sees us He looks at us within the relationship we have with Jesus. We are counted holy as we are "in Christ". It is like the basketball player who played with Pete Maravich at LSU. He said he and Pete scored 50 points in one game. This was true even though Pete had scored 47 and he scored 3.

In his greeting to the church in verse 3, Paul greeted them with the reality of God's grace and peace. God's unmerited favor had been bestowed on them, and they had peace with God, all because of Christ's sacrificial death for them. Paul went on to say that they were "enriched" in Christ, and they were not lacking in any spiritual gift from God. Even better they had the promise of Christ's return for them, and at that time they would be "held blameless". God is faithful and unchanging about His promises. In Ephesians 1, Paul also told the church that God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing, He chose us, loves us, redeemed us, the Holy Spirit indwells us, and we have His Word of truth. This is the good news that we have it all. God has set us up in position to succeed, and to live godly lives that will honor and glorify Him.

It is amazing that Paul could say so many wonderful and positive things to the people at Corinth when he is going to then admonish them for the next 15 chapters. I'm sure he hates to have to admonish them, but it was necessary. They have all the potential to turn it around, to repent and get with God's program, and begin to represent Him well. I think the key issue they had to deal with was pride. We all have this problem in varying degrees, but based on what Paul said in chapter one, we have nothing to be proud about before God. All the credit and glory goes to God for Jesus' work on our behalf. We have every reason to glorify Him and

not ourselves.

Consequences

In 1 Cor.1-4, Paul admonished them for their pride, which has created divisions that have separated them and threaten to break up the church. In ch.3 he wrote that they were like men of flesh or baby Christians who were still being fed milk and not solid food. The consequences of continuing to live this way are given in 1 Cor.3:12-15 with imagery of the judgment day of Christians. Even though our sins will be forgiven, our lives will still be analyzed by God. Paul said, "Be careful what you build on the foundation which has been laid which is Jesus Christ." The analogy is that our lives are like a building being built on our foundation, which is Christ. This foundation is awesome, able to hold the highest and heaviest building. Will we build a one story shack on a foundation laid for a skyscraper? Paul went on to say that the judgment day for Christians will be like a fire that will test or prove the quality of our work which is likened to building materials. Will our lives be like wood, hay, or stubble, which will be burned up in the fire, or will they be like gold, silver, and precious stones which will survive the fire and receive a reward? Christians are supposed to be living a life that serves and glorifies the Lord. Paul established in ch.1 that we have everything we need to do so, therefore let the Spirit of God change you. Step out in faith to serve God instead of self, and love your neighbor as yourself, "and whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus".

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