

1 CORINTHIANS, chapters 1-4

"City of Sinners, but for Christ"

HPC Trinity Class

Nov. 10, 2024



The Acro-corinth as viewed from the Temple of Apollo in Corinth

First century Corinth was a cesspool of sin and corruption, even by the accounts of its own residents. We have to remember that this was both a navy port and an international trading hub. Therefore, its location on the isthmus (and being only 45 miles from Athens) made it a truly global city, susceptible to all of the world's vices.

So, how nasty was this city?

(See me after class. --GS)

Corinth was no village. With approximately 250,000 people it was one of the largest—and richest-- cities in the world. However, about 1/3 of these people were slaves. And despite its Greek heritage, Corinth culture was quickly morphing into that of its conqueror, Rome.



Chapter 1

1:1-9---Paul begins his letter to the church in Corinth with a greeting typical for his time: sender, recipient, greeting.¹ Though about three years had passed since he left Corinth—it was now about 55 A.D.-- Paul was familiar with to whom he was writing, because he had taught, worked, and worshipped in that city for about 18 months. He had given the Corinthians a good Christian foundation, he believed, so he left on an extensive journey to other cities in the hope of establishing yet more churches. One of these church plants was in Ephesus where Paul learned of the trouble in Corinth.

¹ Paul wrote his letter in Greek. By now the Roman Empire had engulfed this corner of the world. Greek, however, was still the language of the people. Latin was reserved for use in the courts and by administrators. (Witherington. pg. 14.)

The Greco-Roman religious beliefs that Paul confronted in Corinth:

- ✚ no sense of sinfulness
- ✚ no denial of worldly pleasures
- ✚ no eternal damnation
- ✚ There was no written orthodoxy or “Bible” to use as a guide.



The Greek goddess Hera

Prayer:

- ✚ Upon rising each morning, one prayed with upraised arms to the Olympic gods.
- ✚ In the evening one prayed (with arms down) to the chthonic gods of the dead, the most famous of which was Hades.
- ✚ One could also pray for aid from specific gods, of which there were hundreds. However, the gods of Greece and Rome held little interest in humankind.

[READ 11:10-12]

- “...that there be no divisions among you.” “Divisions” (*schismata*) = cracks, splits, tears---all of these things are permanent and destructive to the faith.
 - “The Corinthian church was divided into at least four factions, each having its own emphasis, following its own leader, and acting in antagonism to the other three.”²
 1. **Paul’s group** which emphasized the ministry to Gentiles, into which most of this church probably fit;
 2. **Apollos’ group** which was probably enamored by this eloquent preacher from Alexandria. Apollos was the one whom Priscilla and Aqila invited to their home after hearing him preach, and who refuted the Jews of Achaia by proving from Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ. (Acts 18:24-28).
 3. The followers of **Cephas** (Peter’s Aramaic name.) Peter had shown a strong affirmation of the Jews. They may have thought him to be a Judaizer.³
 4. **“I follow Christ”** implies that there was another group which claimed a special relationship to Jesus (2 Cor. 10:7), one which was lacking in the other three groups.

[READ 1:13]

Paul sums it up here: Christians are ALL one in Christ. Notice how he places emphasis upon preaching, not on baptizing. Jesus did the same: [READ MARK 16:15-16].

1:18-25 emphasizes that salvation is in Christ, not in our own wisdom or knowledge. The Greeks were famous for their wisdom and logic. Both Greek and Jewish philosophers (*grammateis*)⁴ enjoyed disputing every issue and tried to solve each one by human reason.

² *Expositor’s*, pg. 192.

³ We have no proof that Peter ever visited Corinth, but he must have been well known by them: Peter is mentioned four times in this letter.

⁴ *Grammateas* means “to write,” but in 1st Century Jewish circles it meant “a teacher of the Law.”

[READ 1:22-23]

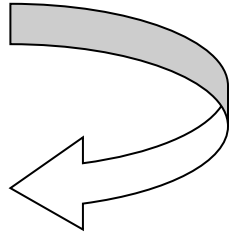
- “to preach Christ crucified” --- the word “crucified” is in an odd verb tense here. It implies that the crucifixion has a continuous, vicarious effect on all who believe.

1:26-31---And remember, you new-found friends in Jesus, God chose you to spread the word of Christ, not because of your influence or noble birth. (Most early converts came to Christianity from the lower social orders and economic classes.) “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”

Chapter 2 [READ 2:1-5]

2:1-5---Paul admits that he must have seemed an unlikely candidate for evangelism. His description of himself is the exact opposite of what the ideal Greco-Roman orator should be. His message and his preaching consistently conform to his personal attitude.

He does not rely on fancy words or persuasive arguments, but instead he relies on the Holy Spirit to guide him.



2:6---“mature” can sometimes refer to adults, though here it refers to one’s behavior as a Christian, not one’s age or intelligence. A mature person in Christ lives out the Gospel daily. (KJV uses the word “perfect.”)

2:9---Paul refers here to the “hidden wisdom” of God as expressed in Isaiah. The rulers of this world see only tomorrow, but God’s promise stretches far beyond for those who believe.

[READ 2:10-11] God’s wisdom can only be understood through the Holy Spirit.

2:13-16---Paul refers to his own ministry here, where the wisdom of God takes precedence over that of humans. People who shun God’s spirit and do not accept the fruits of God consider Him and his Spirit to be foolishness. The spiritual man makes conclusions guided by God’s Spirit, not by the world. Paul quotes from Isaiah again, confirming that a Christian is not subject to another’s judgement in regard to spiritual matters.

CHAPTER 3

Paul continues to be frustrated by his Corinthian brothers, and he gently lashes out at them.

- They are still worldly because they are pledging themselves to mere men (Paul, Apollos, etc.). **[READ 3:1-9]**
 - Paul had to begin his ministry here by using baby steps, gently bringing the Corinthians into a trusting faith with God through Jesus Christ....rather than looking to the immature men who were controlled by prejudices and



viewpoints of an unsaved world. These men were not “spirit filled;” rather they were “those controlled by the flesh.” (*sarkinois*)

- v. 5--Paul stresses that he and Apollos are simply servants of the Lord.
 - “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.” (v.6)
 - He emphasizes that God’s servants really act as one. There is no “me” when doing God’s work.
- The foundation of a building is the key to its strength. In vs. 10 Paul gloats a bit about the strong foundation of faith he laid in introducing the Corinthians to Christ.

[READ 3:10]

The list of building materials Paul mentions are odd: some of it is merely expensive decoration while other material is practical but low-end basic.⁵ In any case, God will judge the builder on “the Day”—the day of judgement.

Paul is telling the Corinthian church that he has laid a very solid foundation for them: “Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Now, it’s up to these wanta-be Christians to thoughtfully and lovingly build upon this.

- v. 16: “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?” Paul drills this message home ten times in this letter. Here he speaks of God’s temple as being the congregation itself; later (Chap. 6) he refers to it on a personal basis.

v. 18-22---Paul keeps coming back to the subject of wisdom.

WHY??

Despite the fact that Corinth was now under Roman rule, much of its population thought like Greeks, and for a Greek the attainment of wisdom was paramount for happiness.

“The problems in the Corinthian church derived from contemporary cultural values of Greco-Roman society that some of the Corinthian believers never abandoned or to which they returned after Paul left the city.”⁶

Chapter 4

4:1-5—Paul uses the word “servants” (*hyperetas*) on purpose, so that he and Apollos might be differentiated from *doulos* (slaves). Paul believes that they are servants of Christ, not servants of the Corinthians. But that is for the Lord to judge when he comes (v. 5).

vs. 6-7---Ministers for Christ must lead by example, like Paul is doing among you, not simply teaching abstract principles. You are not to judge each other; God will do that. The phrase in v. 6 is a bit confusing, when Paul instructs his followers to “not go beyond what is written.” This may be Paul’s way of keeping egos and boasting in check among his Corinthian followers. True faith, he said, is Jesus-centered and is not based upon secular values.

⁵ Herod’s temple in Jerusalem, with its precious metals and stones, may have been the imagery Paul had in mind.

⁶ Zondervan, *Introduction to 1 Corinthians*, pg. 2325.

vs. 8-20---Paul continues to chastise the Corinthian believers, some of whom were wealthy and haughty. They are viewing apostleship as being just another feather in their socio-religious caps. Paul sets them straight. **[READ 4:9-13]**.

“...I urge you to imitate me.” v. 16.

Works Cited

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ADDENDUM

“Even at a time when public morality everywhere in the Empire was at a low ebb, Corinth in Paul’s day was notorious for its lax morals.”

(Interpreter’s, vol. 1, “Corinthians, First Letter to the,” pg. 685.)

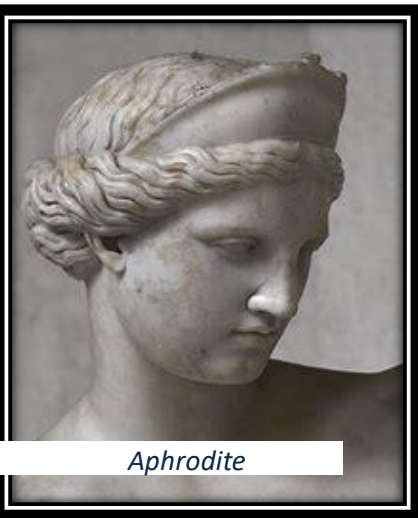
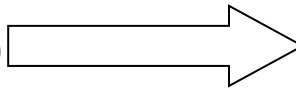
Ancient Corinth was:

- a world-wide seaport and trading center,
- a retirement locale for Roman soldiers,
- a strategic defense hub for the Roman government... and it had a reputation for sex of all kinds.

We read in 2 Kings 23:1-7 of the radical reform against cult prostitution. This demonstrates how strongly it had taken hold. “The practice of cult prostitution was far more serious in the view of biblical writers than common harlotry.” (Babb)

Prostitution was not illegal; it was regulated by the government, required registration and payment of a fee. Prostitutes were required to wear distinctive clothing, which meant no stolas.

(“Don’t bother with this one; she’s not a prostitute.”)



Aphrodite

Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus, was the Greek goddess of love, lust, beauty, pleasure, passion, and procreation. She was also the patron goddess of prostitutes. Her Roman counterpart was Venus. The blending of Greek/Roman culture in Corinth made for an easy transition.

It was rumored that 1,000 prostitutes plied their wares at the Temple of Aphrodite in Corinth, but such a number is an exaggeration. Before 400 A.D., when the Roman emperor Constantine banned the riotous festivals held in her name, hoards of people came not only to worship and to pay homage to Aphrodite, they also participated in orgies. Having sex with strangers was not only possible, but obligatory. (Watson)

Aphrodite’s servants, who may or may not have been attractive, were not exactly willing volunteers. In fact, Corinth’s many cosmopolitan *pornai*, or prostitutes, were slaves purchased by wealthy Greeks and dedicated to the temple as a form of religious offering. (Perrottet)

In ancient Greece sexual orientation had a minor role in the construction of gender. No one was defined by their sexual preferences, and social norms saw sex as a natural practice that had nothing to do with a *polis* [the Greek city/state] or acceptance from the others. Male prostitution was as common as female prostitution. (Carrasco)