

9. From Athens Paul continued south to Corinth at the southern tip of the Greek mainland (18:1). Like Athens, Corinth was a leading city of the Roman Empire, largely because of its strategic location. It was situated on the narrow isthmus connecting the Greek mainland with the Peloponnese Peninsula and so possessed two harbors – one on the Corinthian Gulf, the other on the Saronic Gulf. Those harbors served as ports on several Mediterranean shipping routes, making Corinth a busy and prosperous city. Being a Roman colony, Corinth had a large permanent population, but its status as a major commercial center made it a true cosmopolitan city. At any given time, Corinth was filled with diverse peoples and cultural influences drawn from the East as well as the West.

Corinth's distinction and prominence led to its being appointed as the capital of the province of Achaia and therefore the seat of the regional Roman proconsul. Roman political influences together with a transient, pleasure-seeking population of seamen and affluent merchants contributed to Corinth's infamous reputation; if Athens was the cultural and philosophical center of the Greco-Roman world, Corinth was its center of commercial corruption and vice. To this day, seaport cities are notorious as places for military and merchant seamen to indulge their appetites fortified by long periods at sea, with wallets made full by isolation on a ship. Whatever a person sought in the way of natural pleasures, it was available at Corinth, and the vice trade further flooded the city with money. If Athens was full of idol temples and altars, Corinth was full of corruption. Guthrie notes that *"its name had become a byword for profligacy."*

Corinth didn't compete with Athens as the mecca of Greco-Roman religion, but, like every major city of the first-century Roman Empire, it, too, was "filled with idols." In that respect, Corinth's most prominent feature was arguably its splendid temple to the Greek goddess Aphrodite (*Venus* in the Roman pantheon). This temple, situated on the crown of the city's Acrocorinthus and dedicated to the goddess of love, beauty and sexuality, exemplified Corinth's profligate culture. It was populated with some thousand female priestesses whose "priestly" activities included officially sanctioned prostitution. But Corinth's love affair with idolatry didn't end there:

*"Her [Aphrodite's] cult-statue was attired in the armour of the war-god Ares, with his helmet for a foot-rest and his shield for a mirror. At the foot of the citadel stood the temple of Melicertes, patron of seafarers; his name is a hellenized form of Melkart, the principle deity of Tyre [itself a major seaport on the Mediterranean coast]. The Isthmian Games, over which Corinth presided, and in which all the Greek city-states participated, were held every two years; at them the sea-god Poseidon was specially honoured. Corinth paid respect, in Paul's words, to 'many 'gods' and many 'lords.'"* (F. F. Bruce)

Corinth could aptly be called the Vanity Fair of the Roman Empire of the first century. And yet, ironically perhaps to some, Corinth's corrupt, cosmopolitan complexion made it an ideal location for the ministry of the gospel. Though vice promises wealth and pleasure, it always brings desolation and despair, which are fertile soil for the gospel's message of forgiveness, cleansing and new life in Jesus Christ. Beyond that, Corinth was filled with diverse people from many lands and cultures – people who, coming to faith, could then carry the gospel to the far reaches of the Empire.

It is uncertain whether these considerations contributed to Paul's decision to journey to Corinth, but either way, his decision was clearly providential. Christ had determined that His gospel should come to Corinth, and He made known to His apostle His provision for its continuance and fruitfulness among the people of that city. Assured that the Lord and His grace were with him, Paul continued his labors at Corinth for 18 months (18:9-11). By the time he departed, the Spirit of Christ had established and nurtured a significant community of believers there – one that was to have a central place in the Church's scriptural endowment. Though neither Paul nor the Corinthian believers could have known it at the time, Christ's fruitful work in that city was to serve His Church's instruction and edification throughout the centuries until the day of His return in glory.

Christ's work at Corinth was fruitful, but the Corinthian epistles highlight the important truth that spiritual fruit comes through difficulties and the operations of sin and not in the haven of personal, relational, circumstantial, or even spiritual ease. *The Spirit bore the fruit of life and growth in Christ among the Corinthians, but He did so, not simply in the context of their failures and flaws, but by means of them.* The Corinthians' failures served their own good, but they also continue to serve the good of Christ's Church. First of all, they provoked the writing of the Corinthian epistles, particularly as they implicated the Corinthians' long-standing relationship with Paul. But more than that, the epistles' edifying instruction and encouragement are grounded in and flow from those failures.

a. Shortly after arriving in Corinth Paul encountered a fellow Jew from Pontus named Aquila. Luke recorded that he and his wife Priscilla were part of the community of Jews expelled from Rome by the emperor Claudius (18:2). Two things about this circumstance are worth noting in this context:

- 1) The first is the background of this expulsion. Claudius succeeded Gaius (Caligula) as Rome's emperor upon the latter's assassination in 41 A.D. and soon was forced to deal with problems of Jewish civil unrest. Jewish-Gentile conflict had been brewing for some time in Alexandria, and shortly after Claudius' coronation two embassies came to Rome from that city, each intending to argue its case before the emperor.

Apparently the Gentile authorities of Alexandria had rescinded some of the long-standing civil rights of the city's Jews and this had resulted in Jewish rioting. Claudius responded with a letter demanding that the Jews' rights be restored, but also stipulating that there was to be no further immigration of Jews to Alexandria. By limiting the Jewish population, he hoped to control their presence and influence in Alexandria and so make his demands for their rights less threatening to their Gentile neighbors.

- 2) Now, several years later (circa 49 A.D.), Claudius was once again facing Jewish unrest, this time in his own capital city of Rome. In this instance, however, evidence seems to indicate that the conflict was between Rome's Jews and its emerging Christian population.

At this early point in the first century the Gentile world didn't yet recognize Christianity as anything other than another sect of Judaism, and so historical records of this conflict don't identify Christians directly. However, the Roman historian Suetonius made this observation in his biographical account of the life of Claudius: "*Because the Jewish people were continually causing disorders, the catalyst being Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome.*"

Some historians believe the name "Crestus" may be a variation of *Christus*, which is the Latin word for Christ. If this hypothesis is correct, it provides strong historical evidence for the claim that the Roman riots involved Jewish opposition to Christians.

Luke's record also points in this direction by his tacit indication that Aquila and Priscilla were already Christians when Paul met them at Corinth. There's nothing in his account to suggest that Paul introduced the couple to Christ, but he clearly included them in his own gospel ministry, not only in Corinth, but also by taking them with him when he departed for Ephesus (ref. 18:18-26).

- b. God's providence had brought together a Jewish-Christian couple from Rome and the Jewish apostle to the Gentiles. Aquila and Priscilla could never have anticipated that their sudden, disquieting expulsion from Rome would result in their blessed union and co-ministry with one of Christ's appointed apostles. Whether or not they were the only Christians in Corinth at the time Paul arrived, he discovered them to be kindred souls, and his life and ministry were thereafter joined to them (ref. Romans 16:3-5).

Paul shared Christ's life and Spirit with Aquila and Priscilla, but also their trade, and so found himself staying in their house and joining in their tent-making labors (18:3). Doubtless the trio's days together working their craft were filled with excitement and joy in endless discussion of the Lord Jesus – His teaching, ministry, triumphal death, resurrection and ascension and His ever-expanding work in building His Church.

- c. Paul labored alongside Aquila and Priscilla during the week and then used the Sabbath to pursue his usual practice of witnessing to Christ in the synagogue (18:4). Luke's account is relatively scant, but Paul himself provides important insight into his Corinthian ministry in the two epistles he later penned to the believers there. Regarding his own attitude and orientation, he noted that he had been with them "*in weakness and in fear and in much trembling*" (1 Corinthians 2:1-3). This statement is typically treated in one of three ways:

- 1) Some commentators believe that Paul's words reflected his preceding experience at Athens. They argue that he'd had little success in Athens (ref. 17:32-34) and had left the city somewhat dejected and discouraged.

- 2) Others reason that Paul's state of mind resulted from his expectation of the challenges he was going to encounter at Corinth. If Athens was a difficult mission field, Corinth was more so. Athens was a cosmopolitan city, but was much less culturally and religiously diverse than Corinth. Corinth was truly a *world* city, populated with people from Africa, Europe, Asia and the Near East. The Athenian philosophers and public were thoroughly pagan, but they shared the same basic worldview and culture; the paganism of Corinth was as diverse as the people themselves. If "becoming all things to all men" was a challenge in Athens, Paul recognized that it would be infinitely more so in Corinth.
- 3) The third explanation for Paul's statement is that it expressed his general sensibilities and approach in his gospel witness rather than his state of mind at that particular point in time. The surrounding context of First Corinthians argues for this position, since Paul was contrasting his sense of himself in relation to the gospel's power with the arrogant confidence of the Corinthian believers (ref. 1 Corinthians 1:1-2:5).

In the end, all three views are correct in a certain respect. There's no doubt that Paul's experience at Athens had challenged him and enhanced his understanding and expertise in executing his calling. Paul learned and grew from every ministry experience in every place, and Athens was no exception. Whether or not he left that city dejected and discouraged, he certainly carried with him to Corinth the personal fruit of his labors in Athens. At the same time, Paul was familiar with Corinth and knew the sorts of challenges and difficulties he was going to encounter there. He was neither ignorant nor naïve, and so would have arrived at Corinth with a certain amount of trepidation. But Paul's weakness and fear were most grounded in his overwhelming sense of the gospel's weightiness and of his calling as its ambassador. Paul understood that the gospel is the word of the living, triune God to His creation. It proclaims His eternal purpose for it and the fulfillment of that purpose in Jesus Christ. The gospel holds out to the dead and hopeless world the message of renewal and reconciliation in Christ by the Spirit.

The gospel is God's power for salvation, and this truth leaves the human instrument receding into the background. Paul knew that it isn't clever, insightful or persuasive reasoning that brings men to faith, but the power of the Spirit working through the word preached. It was for that reason that he determined to bring nothing to the people of Corinth except the message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). The gospel is God's power, and this truth brought Paul low in his own eyes. He knew the fruitfulness of his labors didn't depend on him, but he also recognized that he could hinder the gospel's work. Paul's trepidation at Corinth reflected his awareness of the gravity of his message and his responsibility toward it. His fear and trembling expressed, not his fear *of* men, but his fear *for* them. Paul knew he had been entrusted with the words of life and he understood all too well the desperate need of all men to embrace those words and find forgiveness, renewal and reconciliation with their Creator-God.