

C. Background

Paul wrote his Corinthian epistles to a particular community of Christians in a particular city. The letters are intensely personal, not just because they were written to a specific church body, or even because they address issues and concerns that were, in some respects at least, unique to that community. Those things are certainly true, but beyond them is the fact that the Corinthian letters were penned by a man who had more than a year and a half of close, personal interaction with that particular group of people. Paul wasn't writing to the church at Corinth as a detached and dispassionate commentator – a remote apostolic authority pontificating on theological and practical matters. *Rather, he wrote as the Corinthians' father in the faith* (4:14-15):

- Paul regarded himself as a devoted and concerned father who'd begotten the Corinthians and betrothed them to their Husband and then labored among them for many months to nurture their faith and strengthen their bond to Christ (ref. 2 Corinthians 11:1-3).
- He was thoroughly invested in the Corinthians as their spiritual father for Jesus' sake, so much so that he bore their burdens more than they themselves did and agonized over them and the strains that had infected and threatened his relationship with them.

The reader of First Corinthians must recognize that he is eavesdropping on an intensely personal correspondence between Paul and the Corinthian believers. It is true that the underlying problem in the Corinthian church – unbelief and natural-mindedness – plagues every church body in every place and time. It is also true that, because people are people, those core maladies manifest themselves in many of the same ways in every congregation. But every church body has its own cultural, demographic and personal dynamics, and those dynamics in the Corinthian body resulted in a plethora of unique problems and challenges. Moreover, the Corinthians' relationship with Paul was unique and that introduced its own qualities and issues – for ill as well as for good.

Thus, in order to enter into this private conversation between the apostle and the Corinthian believers, it is necessary first to enter into their relationship. Only by becoming an “insider” in that relationship, its history, features, and unique dynamics can the third party reader begin the process of interpreting this epistle (as any epistle) and discerning its relevance to him.

1. The place to begin is with the Corinthian people, and that requires a careful look at the civic and cultural aspects of first-century life in the city of Corinth.
 - a. Corinth lay at the southern end of the Greek mainland on the narrow isthmus connecting the mainland to the north and the Peloponnese Peninsula to the south. The city possessed two harbors – one on the Corinthian Gulf leading to the Ionian Sea to the west, and the other on the Saronic Gulf leading east into the Aegean Sea. Corinth's unique geographical location secured for it a prominent and enviable place in the lucrative Mediterranean shipping trade, and the city took full advantage of its privilege. Corinth was a bustling and wealthy city, and, like all busy seaports, one marked by an international flavor and large transient population. At any given time, the city was filled with diverse peoples and cultural influences drawn from the East as well as the West.

- b. Of course, Corinth's value as a strategic seaport wasn't lost upon Rome, and Julius Caesar refounded the city as a Roman colony in 44 B.C. (The Romans had destroyed it in a siege a century earlier in 146 B.C.) Soon Corinth was appointed as the capital of the Roman province of Achaia and therefore the seat of the regional Roman proconsul (ref. Acts 18:1-13).

- c. 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 and bulging wallets. Sailors from all over the Mediterranean world and the Near East came ashore in Corinth seeking every sort of natural pleasure, and the city's merchants were all too eager to oblige. International shipping and Roman political power brought Corinth great wealth, and the city's unrestrained trade in vice only further flooded the city with money. If Athens was full of idol temples and altars, Corinth was full of corruption. Donald Guthrie notes that "*its name had become a byword for profligacy.*"

Corinth's vice trade is most often associated with the voracious fleshly appetites of visiting merchants and sailors, but the city's permanent residents were not immune from its siren song. And yet the people of Corinth found themselves more profoundly corrupted in other more subtle and insidious ways.

- There was plenty of money to be made for the ambitious and enterprising, and it wasn't limited to disreputable businesses. In addition to its ports, the region around Corinth was blessed with abundant natural resources (including plenty of water), and Corinthian businessmen took advantage of this, turning the city into a major production and distribution center for pottery, bricks, roof tile and other building materials.

 - Whether obtained honorably or dishonorably, wealth always encourages and facilitates every sort of human corruption, and Corinth was no exception. Corinthian culture idolized the wealthy, successful and powerful, and, not surprisingly, the people of Corinth were noted for their fierce pride, material ambition, and self-sufficiency.
- d. In terms of its religious culture, 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." Prior to the Roman destruction of 146 B.C., Corinth's most prominent feature had arguably been its splendid temple to the Greek goddess Aphrodite. This temple, situated on the crown of the city's Acrocorinthus and dedicated to the goddess of love, beauty and sexuality, is said to have been populated with some thousand female priestesses whose "priestly" activities included officially sanctioned prostitution. At bottom, Corinth's religious orientation was simply the spiritual counterpart to its material one.

Scholars disagree as to how much of this pre-Roman Corinthian practice continued on into Paul's day, but one thing is certain: Corinth remained a city full of temples, altars and statues dedicated to the pantheon of gods worshipped throughout the Greco-Roman world. When Paul spoke to his Corinthian readers of "many gods and many lords" recognized by human beings (8:4-6), they had no difficulty relating to his words.

2. The second step in entering into Paul's conversation with the Corinthians is understanding the particulars of his ministry to them. As much or more than any first-century city, Corinth epitomized human society and culture as they reflect and express man's alienation from his Creator. And yet, God's design was that this city should become an important enclave of faith and the life of the new creation. In many ways, Corinth was the last place one would have expected the gospel to bear fruit. More than its moral corruption, Corinth's culture of arrogant self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction incited its residents to wave off the gospel of divine mercy and provision in Christ: "*I am rich; I have become wealthy and have need of nothing*" (Revelation 3:17).

- Regardless of whether they manifest themselves in discipline or dereliction, morality or immorality, piety or impiety, the fact remains that human pride, confidence and autonomy present the greatest obstacle to the grace of God which always attains its triumph in broken hearts and lowly minds.
- So it was with the Corinthians: They were a self-assured, self-satisfied people whose minds were filled with "*lofty thoughts raised up against the knowledge of God*" (2 Corinthians 10:1-5). Paul knew precisely what awaited him and his seemingly foolish gospel in Corinth, and thus he came to the city in "*weakness and fear with much trembling*" (1 Corinthians 2:1-3).

Paul was entering the belly of the beast when he walked into the city of Corinth. The city was full of gods, and every one of them contradicted and set itself against him and his gospel, whether the obvious gods of commercialism, vice, power and false religion, or the more subtle and insidious ones of self-sufficiency and self-reliance, human accomplishment, complacency and self-satisfaction. Paul was merely one man and one small voice called to speak over the bustling, seductive and compelling din of the City of Man; nevertheless Paul's God was neither intimidated nor stifled. He had ordained this seemingly hopeless setting for His triumph among the Corinthians, and soon His apostle would understand the reason all the more clearly: "*God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and the weak things of the world to shame the strong, and the lowly and despised things of the world, things that count for nothing, to reduce to nothing the things that are something, so that no human being might boast before God.*"

- a. Luke provides a summary record of Paul's ministry in Corinth in his Acts account (18:1-17). When he arrived in the city Paul providentially met a fellow Jew named Aquila who had recently come to Corinth with his wife as the result of Claudius' expulsion of all Jews from Rome. They welcomed Paul into their home and, working alongside them in their trade, the apostle began his gospel ministry.

Following his usual pattern, Paul first took his gospel to Corinth's Jewish residents. The city's status as an important business and commercial center attracted many Jews from throughout the Mediterranean region and Corinth boasted a large and significant synagogue. Luke indicated that Paul continued his witness to the Jews for quite some time, even devoting himself to it full-time once Silas and Timothy arrived and began providing for his material support.

Though Jewish by heritage and religion, the Jews of Corinth were still *Corinthian*. They assembled in the synagogue, but Corinth's business and financial opportunities brought them to the city. As much as their Gentile neighbors, they were seduced by the City of Man and its promises of wealth, power and security.

Eventually it became clear to Paul that his witness to the Jews had run its course. Interestingly, Luke says nothing of any fruit during that time (cf. Acts 13:14-43, 14:1, 17:1-4, 10-12, 18:19-20, 19:8-10); he noted only that Paul departed from the Jews with open condemnation, shaking out his garments and testifying that their blood was on their own heads. He had fulfilled his obligation to them and his conscience was clear; he would henceforth take his gospel to the Gentiles.

- b. Paul didn't have to go far; a man named Titius Justus (probably a Roman) lived next door to the synagogue. He opened his home to Paul and there the apostle commenced a year and a half of preaching and discipleship. Paul's season in the synagogue had appeared fruitless, but the Lord evidently sparked the interest of Crispus, the synagogue leader. Soon, and right under the noses of his fellows, Crispus came to faith in Christ along with his entire household. So also Paul's months in Justus' house bore fruit among the Gentile Corinthians (18:8).
- c. Paul's Corinthian ministry proved fruitful, but also daunting and dangerous, evident in the Lord's appearance to him (18:9-10). Threats came from without – primarily from Corinth's unbelieving Jewish community (18:12-17), but difficulties also quickly arose from within. Corinth was a diverse city and its diversity was soon reflected in the new community of believers. The most obvious distinction was that of Jew and Gentile, but there were other equally significant differences – differences which posed an ever-present threat to the fledgling Church's internal unity and external witness.

The book of Acts highlights the dynamic of diversity in the Church and reveals it to be the source of all of the Church's internal challenges. Acts shows that, whereas external pressures tend toward the Church's unity and strengthening, internal ones tend toward its infirmity and dissolution. Diversity (personal, cultural, theological, etc.) is always at the heart of the Church's internal problems, and the scope of the Church's diversity only increased with time. Initially, it was the differences between the Hellenists and Hebraists, but soon Samaritans and Gentiles were added to the mix. But years later at Corinth, the differences became more pronounced and complex when the Lord began building a body comprised of individuals from very diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

The city of Corinth was a melting pot, and so was its community of believers. The psychology and practicality of these differences and the challenges and problems they raised would become central to Paul's ongoing relationship with and ministry to the Corinthian church.

3. This points to the third requirement for entering into Paul's letter, which is discerning the various dynamics of his relationship with the Corinthians. Again, Paul didn't write to the saints at Corinth as a distant and dispassionate adjudicator, but as a devoted father who knew them well and shared their lives and burdens. Paul's heart was *with* and *for* the Corinthians, but his fatherly love provoked him to challenge their careless immaturity and lack of discernment in living into the truth of Christ's life in them.
 - a. Paul and the Corinthian believers shared the same faith, the same Spirit, and the same Christ, and yet in certain notable ways they had little in common. In the first place, Paul came from a very different culture than the saints in Corinth. True, there were Jews in the Corinthian congregation, but Jews whose background was far more Hellenized than Paul's. These individuals retained something of their Jewish traditions, but within a larger Hellenistic (Greek) cultural framework and mindset. Paul, on the other hand, had lived for many years as a Pharisee, thoroughly indoctrinated in the Hebrew Scriptures and immersed in the strictest of all Jewish religious and cultural traditions. Paul had spent his adult life sacrificing everything on the altar of absolute devotion to the God of Israel; the Corinthian Jews had devoted their lives to the god of mammon (self-interest). Paul's cultural background differed greatly from the Jewish believers in Corinth, but all the more from their Gentile counterparts. The Corinthian church was a human melting pot, but as much as its members differed from one another, much more did they differ from the apostle who brought Christ's gospel to them.
 - b. From the practical standpoint, Paul also possessed a different perspective from the saints in Corinth. This is not to say that they lacked the life and mind of Christ, but only that, as immature "babes," they failed to live into Christ. Paul saw every dimension and dynamic of life with the mind of the new man (though obviously not perfectly), while the Corinthians largely continued to approach life as "mere men" – individuals who practically, if unconsciously, denied Christ's life in them.

This disparity couldn't help but encourage tension and conflict between the Corinthians and Paul, especially under the influence of distance and time. After his initial departure Paul would not see them for some time, and, in his absence, other influential voices emerged in the congregation – voices of "natural wisdom" that gradually undermined Paul's credibility and standing with the Church. Apollos' arrival only made matters worse, as he provided the Corinthians with a further temptation to judge the apostle with a natural mind. For, in terms of outward considerations, Apollos triumphed over Paul: The former was young and vibrant while the latter was aging and increasingly infirmed; Apollos apparently had a commanding presence, while Paul was diminutive; Apollos was an eloquent orator who made Paul's oration unimpressive by comparison. Diversity at Corinth rapidly devolved into division, and Paul would find himself swept into it.