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**Caving into the Culture.**

The fault-lines of the culture often invade the church. For the believers in Corinth, the city was changing the church rather than the church changing the city. Disunity, pride, & immorality were running rampant. We undoubtedly face these same challenges today.

## Living Under the Cross in a Culture of Chaos

### Historical Background

*Getting into the "sand" of the story...*

**Author: Who Wrote It?**

The apostle Paul is the undisputed author of this letter to the church in Corinth.

Paul first arrived in Corinth during his second missionary journey and enjoyed a fruitful stay of approximately eighteen months (Acts 18:19-11). His arrival was most likely in or around the year 50 AD, and his initial departure at or near the autumn season of 51 AD.<sup>1</sup> While there he met Priscilla and Aquila, who had been forced from Rome due to the edict of Claudius in 49 AD. After successfully planting the Corinthian church, these three left for Ephesus, where Aquila and Priscilla would eventually stay (1 Cor. 16:19) and disciple the young, gifted Apollos.

**Date: When Was It Written?**

During Paul's third missionary journey (Fall, 52 AD) he returned to Asia and

ministered in Ephesus for nearly three years (Acts 19:10; 20:31). First Corinthians was most likely written during the latter half of this term in Ephesus (approx. the spring season of 54/55 AD; see 1 Cor. 16:1-10; Acts 19:10; 20:31).<sup>2</sup>

**Occasion: What Is Addressed?**

Three specific reasons gave Paul occasion for writing this letter to the Corinthians. First, he became aware that his "former" letter, which addressed that issue of separation from those practicing immorality, had been misapplied as a command for complete disassociation from the world (1 Cor. 5:9-13). Second, a report of great division and discord in the church arrived from the house of Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11-17). Third, during this time a delegation comprised of Stephanas, Fortunatas, and Achaicus also brought news of disorderliness and other concerns in the church (1 Cor. 16:15-18; cf. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 15:1; 16:1). For these reasons, Paul wrote this letter while in Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:8-9, 19) and gave it to Titus for delivery.

**Purpose: Why Was It Written?**

The church in Corinth was mostly comprised of newer believers, since Paul had planted the church only four or five years earlier. This group of rather immature Christians hailed from a wide spectrum of influence, background, and education.

Therefore, Paul primarily wrote this letter to call the Corinthians to demonstrate the real-life implications of their new life in Christ. Paul never calls into question their salvation, but rather reaffirms their relationship with God (1 Cor. 1:2, 8). Yet they needed to understand how their new position in Christ impacted how they were to live and worship as members of Christ's body, the new covenant community of the Spirit (1 Cor. 11:23-12:13).

In essence, Paul wrote so that the Corinthian believers would align their corporate, progressive sanctification with the reality of their positional sanctification.

### The Struggle Is Real.

Temptations abound. Cultural pressures aim to squeeze us into the socially acceptable mold. Sin lures us in like a professional fisherman. Political maneuvers, gossip, and slander knock on the door of every church. Dividing often overrules uniting. Do you feel this struggle? We all have... including the believers in Corinth.

**The Gospel of the Cross is counter-intuitive, counter-cultural, and counter-comfort.**



Corinthian Stater. Cir. 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC

## Cultural Background

Getting into the "sandals" of the story...

The city of Corinth has nurtured a long and colorful history. Before the reign of Julius Caesar, this city participated in a revolt against Rome that led to a devastating destruction of the metropolis. Later in 46 BC, Julius himself commissioned the city to be rebuilt.<sup>3</sup>

Two particular amenities drew culture and money to Corinth. First, its prime location near the Isthmian land bridge brought an influx of sailors and other tradesmen into the marketplace. Away from home and family, these men were known for indulging in the profuse sexual promiscuity of the town.<sup>4</sup> This sort of lifestyle lent itself to the reputation that Corinth was a city brimming over with all sorts of debauchery and drunken licentiousness. The second "amenity" was the city's prominent Temple of Aphrodite. Numerous ancient sources attest to Corinth's lascivious stupor. The most highly appraised description comes from the hand of the ancient Strabo (1<sup>st</sup> BC – 1<sup>st</sup> AD):

The temple of Aphrodite was so rich that it owned more than a thousand temple-slaves, courtesans, whom both men and women had dedicated to the goddess. And therefore it was also on account of these women that the city was crowded with people and grew rich; for instance, the ship-captains freely squandered their money, and hence the proverb, "not for every man is the voyage to Corinth."<sup>5</sup>

Playing off Corinth's widely known reputation, the ancient writer Aristophanes used the term *korinthiazomai* to denote fornication (i.e. "to corinthianize").<sup>6</sup>

Of note, however, the reality of these claims placed upon Corinth may have held more validity prior to the city's destruction by Roman forces in 146 BC.<sup>7</sup> For nearly a hundred years after this battle, the city laid in waste and ruin. Nearly all citizens and slaves were either slaughtered or taken into captivity. While there is still record of the city regaining some of her original status as "sin city" after being rebuilt, there is little indication that Corinth was any more sinful than other coastal cities in the Roman Empire during the first century AD.



Red arrow denotes the Isthmian land bridge. North Mediterranean; 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD

## God's Word...for Us

By the time Paul arrived in Corinth, the populace was indeed sinful but not in a tremendously greater degree than other pagan cities. This understanding brings our application of Paul's message to the Corinthians much closer to home. In fact, Corinth can no longer be likened only to metropolitan areas such as Las Vegas or San Francisco, but also cities like Cleveland, Tampa, Atlanta, St. Louis, and Dallas.

Yes. The church in ancient Corinth was in an environment not very different than our own. Immoral lifestyles, sexual promiscuity, drunkenness, early forms of narcotics, religious pluralism, self-promotion, a focus on position, power, wealth, etc. . . . were all prevalent in Corinth. The people did life *their way*.

But then the gospel message broke-through into their dark, depraved lives. Men and women started turning to Jesus Christ for forgiveness, hope, and eternal life. However, they were still prone (like us!) to act, think, and talk like they were still entrenched in their previous way of life. Carson and Moo wrote:

They had not grasped how the theology of the cross not only constitutes the basis of our salvation

but also and inevitably teaches us how to live and serve – and such teaching is in radical contradistinction to a world dominated by self-promotion and social climbing.<sup>3</sup>

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*"The local church should reflect the truth about God. If it is divided, it teaches everyone that Christ is divided."* – Mark Dever

## Bibliography

- <sup>1</sup> Wallace, Daniel B. *1 Corinthians: Introduction, Argument, and Outline*. Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 1998: 2.
- <sup>2</sup> Lowery, David K. "1 Corinthians" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: an Exposition of the Scriptures*. New Testament ed. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983: 506.
- <sup>3</sup> Carson, D.A., and Douglas J. Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005: 419-427.
- <sup>4</sup> Ashcraft, Roy Neil. "The Historical Setting of 1 Corinthians." Th.M. Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1958: 23.
- <sup>5</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 8.6.20; LCL; cited by DeMaris, 2002: 73.
- <sup>6</sup> Aristophanes, *Fragment*, 354; cited in Lowery, "1 Corinthians," 505.
- <sup>7</sup> Fantin, Joseph. "The Wickedness of Corinth and Archaeology: Unpublished Class Notes for NT111." Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 2007: 1-2.