

“Dwelling in Corinth: A Preamble of Sorts”

1 Corinthians 1:1-9 | Week of January 8-14, 2011 | MaranathaGrace.org

The church at Corinth was experiencing some real shocking issues during the Apostle Paul's day. We're not talking about indecision over what colors to paint the newly renovated facilities or perhaps a disagreement over whether or not church should use drums during worship in song time. We are talking serious manifestations of blatant sin.

Corinth was a Roman city on an isthmus in Greece located between two ports. On the east side, the harbor of Cenchreae (sen-tree-ae) faced across the sea to the Roman province of Asia & Ephesus. And on the west side, the port of Lechaemum faced Italy and ultimately Rome. This made Corinth ideally situated for east-west trade. Not only that, it also happened to have an almost equally favorable position between northern and southern Greece—to the north there was the province of Achaëa, and Macedonia even further north (Philippi & Thessalonica) and to the south there was the Peloponnese peninsula.

This locale provided the 'perfect storm' that would result in Corinth becoming not only a major trade route, but quite simply a cosmopolitan & commercial powerhouse of a city. It became a metropolis—one that had the equivalent of professional sports teams & leagues (the Isthmian Games were second only to the Olympic Games), a flourishing cultural scene, and an entrepreneurial spirit brought upon by the many who came from far-and-wide to pursue “the Corinthian Dream.”

The history of the city made this very possible for new inhabitants. How so? Back in the 2nd century BC, Corinth was an enemy of the Roman Empire—it was the chief city of the Grecian Achaean league that revolted rather than submit to Rome's demands to dissolve the league. So it was sacked, plain & simple, by the Roman Empire in 146 B.C. and it remained largely uninhabited for 102 years until 44 B.C. when an emperor by the name of Julius Caesar decided to establish a colony for the purpose of fighting overcrowding in Rome and to promulgate Roman civilization worldwide.

Ideal geography and near perfect timing, on top of a wealth of natural resources, led to the city being transformed from ruins to riches—to the extent that wealth and ostentatious display became the hallmark of Corinth in the Apostle Paul's day. Traders, craftsmen, artisans, entrepreneurs, and menial servants from all over the Roman Empire searched out Corinth for opportunity. It was a city without an established, blue blood aristocracy where there was real opportunity for upward social mobility. With the proper networking and patronage, it was possible to make it big.

But as with any quickly developing society, particularly an urban one, there were societal ills that sprung up just as quickly. Poverty, elitism, hierarchicalism, prejudice, non-egalitarianism, and raw debauchery plagued this great city. To be called a “Corinthian” was pejorative in a major way. One author wrote on why he would never go to Corinth, “I learned in a short time the nauseating behavior of the rich and the misery of the poor.”

It became a shallow city of pretense & artifice. Wealth, power, influence, prestige, education, and sensuality became the end-all pursuit for most in this society. Listen to the way one author put it, “To use terms from American culture: schmoozing, massaging a superior's ego, rubbing shoulders with the powerful, pulling strings, scratching each other's back, and dragging rivals' names through the mud—all describe what was required to attain success in this society.” It was a culture that valued self-promotion, self-sufficiency, self-indulgence, autonomy & libertarian freedom.

Beyond this, Corinth was a religious melting pot with older, traditional religions and newer religions flourishing side-by-side and even syncretistically. Greek, Roman, Egyptian, pagan gods/goddesses were worshiped in temples & houses of worship all over. But regardless of which god you worshipped, you had reason for arrogance because you were practicing a “Corinthian” spirituality that was made it de rigueur.

Such was the ethos (the fundamental character or spirit of a culture that informed its beliefs and created its customs/practices) of Corinth and it was in this environment that Paul, on his 2nd missionary journey, planted this church.

This backdrop of history, sociology, economics, and religion should help us understand how this church was so beset with problems. What happened? Well...over a period of time *too much of Corinth's dominant culture had permeated and affected the church, rather than the church permeating and affecting the surrounding culture*. And it got so bad that it seems that some of the church's moral failures even shocked the secular culture-at-large. The prevailing social mores and ethics were antithetical to the message of the Cross. Ruthless self-advancement was the only way to survive as it was their paragon of a dog-eat-dog society. And the Christian community, the church, blended in perfectly as it morphed into just another arena to compete for prominence.

Nevertheless, this was the city that Paul journeyed to from Athens on his 2nd missionary journey—a city that may seem to be a very unlikely place for the gospel to take root (you can read all about it in Acts 18:1-11). Paul invested a great deal into this church God planted thru him and others. Overall, he spent eighteen months ministering in Corinth.

- » What culture does this remind you of?
- » How can you tell if you're affecting culture (gospel contextualization or being overly-affected by culture (compromising))?
- » Plz read 1 John 2:15-17; now read John 17:13-18. Is the Apostle John speaking out of both sides of his mouth? Discuss.

Well, not long after Paul departed, things began to unravel. Paul got wind of some troubling situations so he wrote them a letter (that we no longer have) that's referred to by Paul in 1 Cor. 5:9 as "the previous letter." Letters went back-and-forth; things just got worse. Such was the 'impossible' situation that Paul spoke to in this inspired letter. And in this past Sunday's passage, what do we hear?

Paul follows a greeting pattern similar to most of his letters. He states his name, who he's writing to, he greets his audience, and then warmly offers thanksgiving to God for his readers.

But in this particular letter, he makes some intentional additions. Paul is already ministering to them even in this simple greeting. He's already providing a preliminary address to all the issues that plague this church by bringing them back to where they need to be.

REMINDERS

1. His **Apostleship** (v.1)
2. They are **GOD's** Church (v.2)
3. They are to be **Set Apart** (v.2)
4. They are **Called Together** with All Those in Every Place (v.2)
5. Everything they have is **For/Because/In/About/Revealed/Sustained/& Fulfilled thru Christ** (vv.4-9)

PAST → "grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus"

PRESENT → "you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ"

FUTURE → "who will sustain you to the end"

- » How does arrogance manifest itself in our lives, individually & corporately? Have you ever heard the term *chronological snobbery*?
- » When you embrace God's promises, do you respond with doubt, presumption, or faith?
- » Why are you looking forward to the rest of this "Dwelling in Corinth" series?

We encourage you to get ahead with reading the entire book of 1 Corinthians. **Maranatha!**