

CORINTHIANS - THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY

INTRODUCTION:

Creation Corrupted: Paul targets Sodom by the Sea

... do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. **And such were some of you;** but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God.

I CORINTHIANS 6:9,10

The BACKGROUND of the CITY

The Spirit's task in Corinth -- bringing the law of Christ to a lawless, self-exalting society

... it was rather the market-place of the Vanity Fair of Greece, and even of the Empire ... the Empire in miniature ... with some of the worst features of heathenism intensified, as Rom.i.21-32, which was written in Corinth, plainly shows. [Robertson/Plummer 12,13]

[the Corinthians] were notorious for immorality and drunkenness; so much so that a 'Corinthian' came to mean a profligate, a libertine. Their temple of Aphrodite possessed a thousand consecrated prostitutes. The city was a veritable Gomorrah, and it was from here that Paul dictated his frightful sketch of Paganism (Rom. i.21-32). [W. Graham Scroggie 393]

... the prosperity of Corinth depended almost entirely on its geographical position. The Isthmus, which joined northern Greece to Peloponnesus, and cut off the Aegean Sea from the Corinthian Gulf, was necessarily the highway of commerce. Into Corinth flowed the wealth of East and of West. Here the intellectual forces of the age met. Hither streamed the licentiousness that had been either the shame or the religion, or both, of the lands of its birth. Of Greek cities the least Greek, it was at this time the least Roman of Roman colonies. The cult of Aphrodite, for which Corinth was famous, was Greek; but her priestly establishment, consisting of a thousand courtesans, was an attempt to acclimatise the worship of the Phoenician Astarte. Politically Roman, socially Greek, religiously it was Roman, Greek, Oriental, all in one. When, therefore, the Apostle preached to the Corinthians, the

Gospel spoke to the whole world and to the living present. [Edwards xii]

Incidentally, the often-peddled statement that Corinth was a seat of sacred prostitution (in the service of Aphrodite) is a fable. [Hans Conzelmann 12]

The ideal of the Corinthians was the reckless development of the individual. The merchant who made his gain by all and every means, the man of pleasure surrendering himself to every lust, the athlete steeled to every bodily exercise and proud in his physical strength, are the true Corinthian types: in a word the man who recognized no superior and no law but his own desires. [von Dobschutz in Morris 17]

AUTHENTICITY and ORIGIN

How did the Corinthian church get its start?

Both the external and the internal evidence for the Pauline authorship are so strong that those who attempt to show that the Apostle was not the writer succeed chiefly in proving their own incompetence as critics. [Robertson/Plummer xvi]

[Paul] knew well it was not in vain that God had paved the way for the preaching of the gospel in the Gentile world by the dispersion of the people of Israel, and that this was the door providentially opened for the proclamation of the good news in the midst of heathendom [Godet 8]

The reason for writing is a letter from Corinth (7:1). Paul is in Ephesus (16:8). He has sent Timothy to Corinth (4:17; the latter is accordingly not the bearer of the letter). [Conzelmann 4]

Why PAY MORE than USUAL ATTENTION?

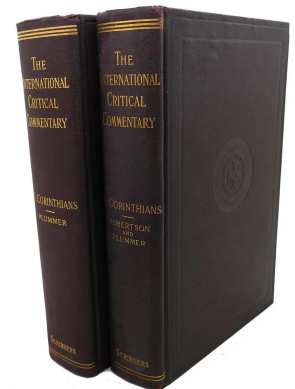
Our best window into the early church

The First Epistle to the Corinthians affords more information than any other New Testament book about the internal affairs of an apostolic church ... [it] alone presents the practical problems of an early church in the fulness of their puzzling variety. [Machen 131]

In its alternations of light and shadow it vividly reproduces the life of a typical Gentile-Christian community, seething with the interaction of the new life and the inherited character, with the beginnings of that age-long warfare of man's higher and lower self which forms the under-current of Christian history in all ages. [Robertson/Plummer xxxiv]

The antidote to many illusions about 'acceptable fellowship' and 'right order' in the church

No other book of the NT, in fact, reflects so richly the life of the Christian body as it then was ... We note especially the development of *discipline*, of *organization*, and of *worship* ... The organization of the Corinthian church is evidently still at an early



stage. There is no mention of bishops, presbyters or deacons: next after Apostles, prophets and teachers are named, in remarkable agreement with the reference of Acts 13:1 ... [Robertson/Plummer xxxix]

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The antidote to non-Christian, even pagan emphases and errors

For one strand of Hellenistic thought the possession of the Spirit, the heavenly essence, was the all-important matter: the crowning achievement of Christ was the impartation of the Spirit. His crucifixion was significant mainly as the means by which he had outwitted and conquered the 'principalities and powers' that were hostile to men and would have prevented them from enjoying the heavenly gift. But now that they enjoyed the heavenly gift, they had 'arrived'; the kingdom was theirs already (cf. 1 Cor.4:8ff.). What could the hope of resurrection add by way of bliss to those who knew themselves here and now to be 'men of the Spirit'? Let others know the exalted Christ as he was proclaimed to them by Paul or Apollos or Peter; they were in direct touch with him by the Spirit, and had no need of such intermediaries. We shall not be far wrong if we identify the people who argued thus with the 'Christ party' whose existence is probably implied in 1 Cor.1.12. The same attitude appears in the exaggerated estimate placed by some Corinthian Christians on the more spectacular and ecstatic 'spiritual gifts' -- especially glossolalia ... Such a manifestation as glossolalia was not peculiar to Christianity: Greece had long experience of Pythian prophecy and Dionysiac enthusiasm. [F.F. Bruce 20-21]

Who or what is it that Paul has to combat here? At first sight, his foe is moral and religious disorders, such as sexual freedom or the degeneration of the Lord's supper. Now these conditions are bound up in a significant way with religious enthusiasm. Plainly in the mind of the Corinthians the two are a unity: their conduct is grounded on a freedom principle (6:12; 10:23); this in turn rests upon "knowledge" (8:1), and the latter derives from experience of the Spirit (12:4ff) ... This transformation by which the faith that is related to the word is turned into spiritual experience of the self accounts for all the phenomena encountered in 1 Corinthians, as also for the way in which Paul enters the lists. He consistently opposes the movement of spiritual ascent and reverses the direction of thought, and thus uses his theology of the cross to bring out more clearly than in any other epistle the historic character of faith. [Conzelmann 14,16]



Charles Hodge

There is another consideration which gives a special interest to these epistles. They show more clearly than any other portion of the New Testament, Christianity in conflict with heathenism. We see what method Paul adopted in founding the church in the midst of a refined and corrupt people; how he answered questions of conscience arising out of the relations of Christians to the heathen around them. The cases may never occur again, but the principles involved in their decision are of perpetual obligation, and serve as lights to the church in all ages. Principles relating to church discipline, to social relations and intercourse, to public worship, the nature of the church, and of the sacraments, are here unfolded, not in abstract form, so much as in their application. These epistles, therefore, in reference to all practical measures in the establishment of the church among the heathen, and

in its conduct in Christian lands, are among the most important portions of the word of God. [Hodge xxv, xxvi]

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