Introduction to 1 Corinthians

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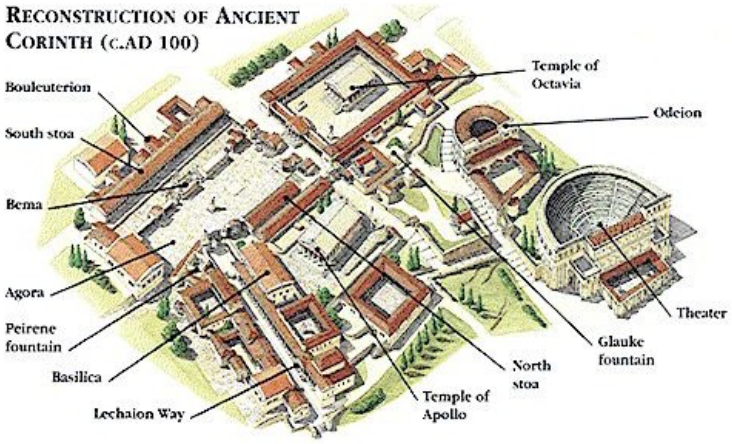
Inspired the Holy Spirit, St. Paul wrote this open letter to the Church in Corinth around A.D. 55. He established this congregation during his 2nd missionary journey in A.D. 52.

THE CITY OF CORINTH

- Corinth was situated on the Isthmus of Greece (called Achaia in the Bible) between the Ionian Sea and the Aegean Sea, above the Mediterranean Sea. About 50 miles west of Athens.
- Athens had been the leading cultural center in Greece, but under Roman rule, Corinth was made the capital of the Roman province called Achaia (which included Athens) and became the most important city in Greece.
- **The Corinth Canal**
  - Because of its two seaports, Corinth became a commercial center and many small ships were rolled or dragged across the Corinthian isthmus to avoid the dangerous 200-mile voyage around southern Greece.
  - Nero and others attempted to build a canal at the narrowest point (5 miles wide), but the work was not completed until 1893. The canal was carved out of solid rock.



- A great lighthouse and Poseidon Temple guided ships into the harbors, filling the city's markets and the warehouses on the wharves with goods from around the empire and beyond – spices from India; silk from China; linen from Tarsus; marble from Turkey, Greece and North Africa; timber from Italy. Upon docking at either port, small ships were placed on rollers and pulled across the isthmus by slaves on a four-mile-long marble slip-way.

- Corinth of Paul's day was relatively new. The old Corinth was burned in 146 B.C. by the Roman proconsul Mummius. Because it was a city devoted to the gods, a hundred years were required to pass before the city could be rebuilt.
- In 46 B.C., Julius Caesar rebuilt the city, populated it was a colony of veterans and freedmen, and named it Julia Corinthus. It soon became a very important commercial center.
- **Language**: officially Latin, but common language was Greek.

- **Population**: One million (including: 400,000 slaves)
- Corinth was the most-important city in Greece during Paul's day.
- Corinth became known for its sexual immorality, its many idolatrous religions, and its degraded culture. Corinth was so immoral that the Greeks even invented a word "Korinthia-zo-mai" (meaning: "to act like a Corinthian" as the city was known for its drunken parties and gross sexual immorality).
- **The Isthmian Games**
  - Athletic festival held every two years. Second only to the Olympic Games (held every 4 years in Olympia, some 100 miles west of Corinth.
  - Archeologists have recovered coins that witness to the range of international visitors who came to the games.
  - Events included: chariot races, athletic events, competitions in trumpet, flute, and lyre, poetry readings, contests for women, and the *apobatikon*, where a rider would leap from one team of horses to another.
- The **Acrocorinth** on the southern edge of the city was the most imposing landmark. It is a monolithic rock overlooking the city of Corinth.
- The Corinth theater seated 14,000 spectators.
- Corinth was a city of all sorts of vice. The Temple of Venus (Aphrodite) hosted 1,000 priestesses dedicated to prostitution in the name of religion.
- Sexual diseases were rampant in Corinth.
- The many temples in and around Corinth served as major sources of income for the local government.

Corinth and the Church Today

Read: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9. If we read no further than verse nine in chapter one, we might get the impression that these Christians at Corinth were just about perfect. But the fact is that, like us, they were very imperfect. Paul knew them well, better even than they knew themselves. **Read:** Acts 18:1-17. Here, we read about Paul's 18-month ministry among the Corinthians. This was much longer than he ordinarily remained with a new church. This gave him the opportunity to get to know them rather intimately.

Paul's experience at Corinth had been very similar to what he encountered elsewhere in his missionary work. There had been the usual conflict with the Jews, and then, when they rejected the Gospel, Paul directed his ministry to the Gentiles. Many Gentiles in Corinth were receptive and made excellent progress in the Christian faith and in sharing that faith, talking about it with one another and with those outside the Church. However, these believers had not completely shed the evil influences of the corrupt world in which they lived. In fact, reports of serious imperfections among them prompted Paul to write this letter.

There were divisions in the congregation, as well as an ugly case of sexual immorality. Members were suing one another. Some of their marriages were in trouble. Their understanding and practice of the Lord's Supper was distorted. They were confused and uncertain about the resurrection of the body and the life to come. Complicating the situation was a bad attitude. They appeared to have become intellectually and spiritually ignorant. They were very sure that they had all the answers and that they were superior Christians. They were unconcerned about the appalling developments that Paul addresses in the letter.

It's no surprise that the Corinthians were so imperfect. They were new Christians who had come out of a morally bankrupt, pagan environment. Corinth was a large seaport, a center of transportation and commerce and notorious for its open immorality, including extensive temple prostitution. Corinth was permeated with Greek philosophy and its high regard for "wisdom." Those who were religious tended to participate in the worship of one or more of the pagan gods. It is

clear from Paul's comments in this letter that these evil influencers and others like them were taking their toll on the Corinthian Christians.

As each year passes, our society grows more and more like Corinth. Sexual immorality has invaded the Church. Christians quarrel with one another. Believers fail to respect the spiritual leaders God has given us. Few people consider drunkenness a sin. Even Christians who attend church every week sometimes take the Lord's Supper for granted; we fail to prepare our hearts to receive the amazing and powerful gift Jesus has given us in the Sacrament of the Altar.

As we read 1 Corinthians, compare the problems of first-century Corinth with what you see in your own life, your own church, your own city. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see events and people through His eyes. Ask Him to teach you to hate sin and the hurt it causes and to trust Jesus more and more deeply. Let your Savior both confront and comfort you!

Luther's Preface to 1 Corinthians (Chapters 1-4)

In this epistle St. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to be one in faith and love, and to see to it that they learn well the chief thing, namely, that Christ is our salvation, the thing over which all reason and wisdom stumbles.

For it was as in our day, when the gospel has come to light. There are many mad saints (we call them factious spirits, fanatics, and heretics) who have become wise and learned all too quickly and, because of their great knowledge and wisdom, cannot live in harmony with anybody. One wants to go this way, another that way, as though it would be a great shame if each were not to undertake something special and to put forth his own wisdom. No one can make them out to be fools – though at bottom they neither know nor understand anything about what which is really the chief thing, even though they jabber much about it with their mouths.

So it was with St. Paul, too. He had taught his Corinthians Christian faith and freedom from the law. But then the mad saints came along, and the immature know-it-alls. They broke up the unity of the doctrine and caused division among the believers. One claimed to belong to Paul, the other to Apollos; one to Peter, the other to Christ. One wanted circumcision, the other not; one wanted marriage, the other not; one wanted to eat food offered to idols, the other not. Some wanted to be outwardly free; some of the women wanted to go with uncovered hair, and so on. They went so far that one man abused his liberty and married his father's wife, some did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, and some thought lightly of the Sacrament.

In short, things got so wild and disorderly that everyone wanted to be the expert and do the teaching and make what he pleased of the gospel, the Sacrament, and faith. Meanwhile they let the main thing drop – namely, that Christ is our salvation, righteousness, and redemption – as if they had long since outgrown it. This truth can never remain intact when people begin to imagine they are wise and know it all.

This is exactly what is now happening to us. Now that we, by God's grace, have opened the gospel to the Germans, everyone claims that he is the top expert and alone has the Holy Spirit – as if the gospel had been preached in order that in it we should show off our cleverness and reason, and strive for a reputation. Those Corinthians may well be an example or illustration of our people in these days, who also certainly need an epistle of this kind. But this is why things have to go with the gospel; mad saints and immature know-it-alls have to create disturbances and offenses, so that those who are "tested," as St. Paul says here [1 Cor. 3:13], may be revealed.

Therefore St. Paul most severely rebukes and condemns this shameful wisdom, and makes these connoisseur saints out to be fools. He says outright that they know nothing of Christ, or of the Spirit and gifts of God given to us in Christ, and that they had better begin to learn. It takes spiritual folk to understand this. The desire to be wise and the pretense of cleverness in the gospel are the very things that really give offense and hinder the knowledge of Christ and God, and create disturbances and contentions. This clever wisdom and reason can serve well to make for nothing but mad saints and wild Christians. Yet such people can never know our Lord Christ, unless they first become fools again and humbly let themselves be taught and led by the simple Word of God. This is what St. Paul deals with in the first four chapters.

What similarities do you find with ancient Corinth and today?