

CITIES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT: CORINTH

Sitting at the crossroads of the Roman Empire and, arguably, at the crossroads of the Christian world of the first century, was the fascinating Achaian city of Corinth. Because of its diversity and economic opportunity, Corinth is perhaps the biblical city that is most relevant to America. This issue of Ekklesia Then & Now, the first in a series on the cities of the New Testament, will explore the history, geography, religion, culture, and people of Corinth.



The Acrocorinth and the City

Then



The World of Aquila and Prisca

Geography

In the first century, Corinth was the boomtown of the Roman Empire, comparable to 19th century St. Louis in America. Situated at the crossroad of trade between east and west and served at the twin ports of Lechaeum to the west and Cenchrea to the east, Corinth was populated with as diverse a population as might be found in the Roman world. Geographically, the city was dominated by the 1900-foot limestone monolith known as the Acrocorinth, which served as a natural protection from invasions from the south. In later

centuries, an imposing fort was built into the Acrocorinth. Corinth also enjoyed an ample water supply from the Peirene Spring that flowed from the side of the Acrocorinth.

History

Evidence exists of settlement at Corinth from as early as 5000 B.C., but it wasn't until the eighth century B.C. that it became an important city, even establishing colonies of its own. From this time, a series of kings ruled Corinth, concluding with Periender, whose reign ended in 585 B.C. During his reign, a six-mile track across the isthmus—the diolkos—was built, furthering Corinth's value. Using the diolkos, cargo or even small ships could be dragged across the isthmus on logs, allowing ship

captains to avoid 200 miles of often difficult open sea.

A series of aristocracies and oligarchies followed as Corinth alternately warred and allied with the more powerful Greek cities of Athens and Sparta. By the draw of Roman dominance, however, Athens and Sparta had declined significantly and Corinth emerged as the most important Greek city. In 146 B.C., Corinth refused to cooperate with an increasingly powerful Rome, and after a series of insults, including tossing sewerage from upper windows onto Roman ambassadors, the city was completely destroyed by General Lucius Mummius. Its treasures were carted off to be displayed in the homes of wealthy Romans. For the next 100 years, Corinth did not exist except as rubble.

"Now after Corinth had remained deserted for a long time," the ancient geographer Strabo reported. "It was restored again, because of its favourable position, by the deified Caesar [in 44 B.C.], who colonized it with people that belonged for the most part to the freedmen class." Largely lacking nobility and social strata, Corinth was a city with unlimited economic opportunity for those willing to work. Major economic growth continued through the first century as Emperors Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius sponsored major building programs.

The biennial Isthmian Games, held were Corinth at the Temple of Poseidon, were re-instated sometime around 50 A.D., about the same time the Apostle Paul first visited the city.

Culture

Corinth was a melting pot of Roman, Greek, Asian, and Jewish peoples and their traditions, but its primary religious influence came from the Temple of Aphrodite (Diana) built atop the Acrocorinth. According to Strabo, "...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 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.'"

The reputation of the city was so sordid, in fact, that it became literally synonymous with fornication (*Korinthiazomai*) in popular Greek. Today, some scholars suggest that the reputation may have been exaggerated by disdainful Athenians, but there is no doubt Corinth had a distinctly permissive environment.

Corinth also boasted a substantial Jewish community, children of the diaspora—the great scattering of God's chosen race by the Babylonians. Their presence in Corinth is testified to by archaeological synagogue remains.

The Ekklesia

Sometime around 49 AD, Christians probably first came to Corinth from Rome. In that year, according to Roman historian Suetonius, Emperor Claudius "banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus." Most authorities agree that Suetonius' comment refers to conflicts between Jews and Christians in Rome. It is highly unlikely that the banishment applied to all Jews in Rome, but rather to one or two synagogue groups. However broad the edict, Aquila and Prisca were among those displaced: "...{Paul} found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome." (Acts 18:2) [As a side comment, this kind of concurrence between the Bible and a contemporary secular historian is one example of the wonderful historicity of the Word of God.]

Whether Aquila and Priscilla were already Christians when they emigrated from Rome to Corinth is a matter of some conjecture. It seems likely to me that they were since I question whether Paul would “yoke himself” to unbelievers by becoming a business partner as he did when he arrived there some two years later.

Eventually, the church at Corinth would come to mirror the ethnic and social diversity of the city, although most names associated with the Corinthian church (e.g., Lucius, Tertius, Quartus, Crispus, Fortunatus) attest to the city’s through Roman absorption. Included in

that eclectic mix were undoubtedly Romans, Greeks, Asians, and Jews. Paul himself later suggested that most came to the church from paganism (cf 1 Corinthians 12:2).



Shops in the agora of Corinth
Image courtesy of www.HolyLandPhotos.org

The Jews included **Aquila and Priscilla** (or Prisca), of course. They were probably middle class leather-workers (tent-makers) in Corinth and may have operated out of a shop in the recently-completed agora

{marketplace}. They went on to be among Paul’s closest and most trusted co-workers. When Paul left Corinth, they went with him to Ephesus, where he left them—almost certainly to gain information about the city and to establish the core of the church Paul would return to nurture later. Sometime later, Aquila and Priscilla returned to Rome (see Romans 16:3-4). I suspect they did so after Claudius’ edict was lifted to again establish a “beachhead” for the Apostle. Later still, we find them back in Ephesus with Timothy (see 2 Timothy 4:19), perhaps having fled Rome during the great Neroian persecution following the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD. Besides Priscilla and Aquila, not Corinthian natives anyway, other notable names from early Corinth are in the Book of Life. They reflect some of the diversity in the congregation(s)



The Erastus Inscription
Image courtesy of
www.HolyLandPhotos.org

Erastus, the city treasurer (oikonomos, see Romans 16:23) eventually rose to become Aedile, which would have made him a member of the city council. A piece of pavement found near the agora in Corinth reads “ERASTVS PRO AEDILE | S P STRAVIT, which is translated as “Erastus in return for his aedileship laid (the pavement) at his own expense.” This suggests that Erastus was a man of some means—not among the poor and down-trodden often assumed to dominate the membership of the early church.

But in being a city official under Roman rule, Erastus would be obliged to participate in official

pagan rituals. That he remained faithful despite his position is proven by his continued association with Paul. After Paul left Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus, he went back to his sponsor congregation in Antioch, spending time there before embarking on this third missionary journey. He traveled back to the congregations he had founded in what is now central Turkey before returning to Ephesus, where he remained for more than two years. Erastus must have taken a leave of absence and gone to Ephesus to be with Paul because Luke tells us that when Paul was getting ready to leave Ephesus to travel into Macedonia (northern Greece), he sent Erastus

and Timothy ahead of him (Acts 19:22). Much later, Paul mentions that Erastus is back in Corinth (2 Timothy 4:20).

How Erastus reconciled his Christian faith with the pagan rituals in which he was obligated to participate is a matter of conjecture. It is possible that Paul had Erastus in mind when he wrote to the Corinthians about eating meat sacrificed to idols: "Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat." (1 Corinthians 8:1, 8) Paul relieves someone like Erastus of guilt by acknowledging that since there are no idols, there can be no such thing as meat sacrificed to them. But Paul also challenges Erastus and others like him to be cautious that this understanding not become a stumbling block to weaker Christians. Undoubtedly, there must have been those in the Corinthian church that criticized Erastus.

Crispus (Acts 18:8) and **Sosthenes** (Acts 18:17) were both Jewish leaders in Corinth. Crispus was among the first Corinthians converted during Paul's visit and was even one of the few baptizing by Paul himself (1 Corinthians 1:14). His conversion could have done nothing to endear Paul to the Jewish community in Corinth. Sosthenes was the leader of the synagogue when Paul was taken before Proconsul Gallio and accused of blasphemy. Gallio had no interest in what he viewed as a squabble between Jews and dismissed the case. For some reason, some citizens of Corinth then



A synagogue lintel from Corinth
Image courtesy of
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beat Sosthenes—perhaps some had been prevented from taking grievances to Gallio because of the incident, or maybe it had put Gallio in a foul mood. More likely, it was just for sport. But Sosthenes's story does not end with the beating for we encounter him again in 1 Corinthians 1:1, when he is in Ephesus helping Paul compose a letter to the ekklesia in his former city. We cannot know for certain what led Sosthenes to Christ or even that it is the same person. Perhaps some in the Christian community ministered to Sosthenes when his Jewish brothers, annoyed that he failed to persuasively present the case against Paul, did not.



Model of a typical Roman *domus*

Gaius appears to have been another relatively wealthy member of the Corinthians church. Paul cites him as "host to me and to the whole church" (Romans 16:23). We know that there were house churches in Corinth (Romans 16:5), but perhaps Gaius hosted the entire community of perhaps 150-200 members during large meetings. To do so, he would need a large home (domus) or other hall at his access.

Phoebe is one of the more interesting and sometime controversial women in the New Testament—something that would undoubtedly have surprised her. She served the church in Cenchrea, Corinth's eastern port, as a diakonos and prostatis of the Cenchrean church (Romans 16:1-2). Diakonos can be translated as servant, minister, or deacon, but Paul's use of the term here appears to be an official one because of the task he has assigned her—carrying his most thorough theological statement to the church in the world's most important city. Similarly, prostatis is a helper or a patroness. One interpretation of Paul's commendation is that Phoebe was a run-of-the-mill Christian—a humble servant and helper. Another, however, is that Phoebe had a designated role in the Cenchrean church, serving as a deacon and providing financial support.

Problems in Corinth

Divisions within the Corinthian church were Paul's principal concern. It is the first

problem he mentions in 1 Corinthians (which was at least the second time he wrote them, see 1 Corinthians 5:9), and he returns to that theme time and again. It is easy to imagine chaotic, contentious assemblies in Corinth as believers battled about influential leaders (1:10-17), hair styles (11:6-15), tolerance (5:1-2), lawsuits (6:1-8) congregational meals (11:17-22), marriage (7:12-16), gender roles (14:34-36), food (8:1-13) and other issues. In most of his discussion, it is not Paul's intention to lay down absolutes, but rather to appeal to the brothers and sisters to regain a sense of unity and be sensitive to those with different understandings. And written between the lines of Paul's discussion of divisions is the likelihood that he was concerned that the Paulines, Petrines, and Apollonians in the groups were spending more time trying to convince other Christians of their positions than they were evangelizing the pagan city.

Unfortunately, Paul's appeal did not have a lasting affect on the Corinthian church. Early in the second century, there was apparently a revolt against the elders of Corinth by some young men. The contentiousness at that time was sufficient to prompt the bishop of Rome, Clement, to make a personal appeal;"

"Ye therefore, who laid the foundation of this sedition, submit yourselves to the presbyters, and receive correction so as to repent, bending the knees of your hearts. Learn to be subject, laying aside the proud and arrogant self-confidence of your tongue. For it is better for you that ye should occupy a humble but honourable place in the flock of Christ, than that, being highly exalted, ye should be cast out from the hope of His people." (1 Clement 57)

Other than divisions, Paul's strongest criticism was reserved for **tolerance**. He is clearly shocked by the incestuous behavior of one Corinthian brother, but he is even more dismayed by the reaction of some within the church. "You have become arrogant," he says (5:2a) and "Your boasting is not good" (6a). Apparently, some took his previous comments to mean that they should have nothing to do with non-Christians. But Paul tells them they've got it reversed—associate with pagans so that they might convert some, but do not associate with an immoral brother who threatens to infect the body: "I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one." (1 Corinthians 5:10-11).

He also had harsh words for those who practiced class distinctions during the **congregational meals**, with some wealthier members shaming the poor with their ostentatious feasts. In this discussion, he sarcastically comments that their artificial divisions must be necessary to show who is approved and who is not (11:19).

Further divisions arose surrounding **speaking during an assembly**, and Paul asked certain people in the congregation to voluntarily give up the right to speak. He asked that [speaking in tongues](#) be limited to two or three people and then only if an interpreter is available (14:27-28). Some prophets were asked to keep silent (14:29-32). Wives were asked not to blurt out questions during an assembly (14:34-35). All of these submissive acts were commended to the Corinthians in order to enhance unity.

Corinth reminds me of a boomtown in the American west of the 19th century!

Now

It also reminds me a lot of America today. Divisions are even more sharply drawn—at least the Paulines, Petrinians, and Apollonians of Corinth sometimes met together. Doesn't the attitude of some within the Episcopal church seem reminiscent of the Corinthian attitude toward the immoral man? Are there churches today where disagreements lead to splits in congregations? Are there churches when class distinctions seem to mean more than devotion to Christ?

Corinth was a fascinating city in its own right, but its real importance to us lies in the enormous lessons in 1 Corinthians that directly apply to today's Christian world. If we're willing to listen, we could learn a lot.

One example: in discussing the church's reaction to the immoral man, Paul writes, "I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person..." (5:10-11a). Don't we in the churches too often get it exactly wrong, avoiding sinful unbelievers but quietly tolerating our misguided brothers and sisters?

NEXT ISSUE: Predestination and Free Will (March 2)

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