

1 Corinthians: Standing Firm in a Pagan Culture

By Steve Ray

(In this article I emphasize the city of Corinth, the immorality and the actual letter; in the next article on 2 Corinthians I will emphasize Paul and his apostolic calling along with the actual letter.)

It was a wicked city. The sandals from travelers of every country in the Empire trudged over its cobblestone streets. Vice and immorality was imported along with exotic cargo and trade goods from around the world—but sensuality and license were also part of the city’s stock, trade, and religion. As a major crossroad of the Empire, ships were unloaded, dragged over the isthmus, and reloaded for transport around the world. During the loading and unloading of ships thousands of travelers entered Corinth to revel in her pleasures and bask in her luxury. Roman soldiers, imperial dignitaries, shipmates, slaves, traders, preachers, and prostitutes all passed through the beautiful Roman city nestled in the Greek province of Achaia.

St. Paul—the rugged traveler and fiery preacher—arrived by ship or along the coastal road from Athens, the philosophical and intellectual center of Greece and the world. He now stood looking out over the city of Corinth, the economic and commercial center and the Roman capital in Greece. To the south, and majestically rising almost 2,000 feet above the city of Corinth, stands the mountain of Acrocorinth. Here, overlooking the city below stood the famous temple of Aphrodite. The finite and pagan gods of Greece and Rome were often as immoral as the human residents. People resemble their deities. Aphrodite was the goddess of love and beauty, of sexual freedom and courtesans. The Temple of Aphrodite at one time boasted of a thousand temple prostitutes who paraded their “sacred service” in the city and certainly were behind Paul’s exhortation to avoid union with prostitutes (1 Cor 6:15–16).

It is in this newly rebuilt city, under the shadow of the temples of Apollo and Aphrodite, and milling about in the pagan throngs among pagan shrines and deities, that St. Paul preached the word of God. Here he lived for eighteen months, and founded a church. It was here that he was dragged to the Judgment Seat to make defense of his gospel (Acts 18:12) and it is to Corinth that he wrote three letters. “Wait,” you say, “I only know of First and Second Corinthians. Where do you find a third letter?” We will discover that in a moment.

Paul arrived in Corinth about AD 51 or 52. He walked up the Lechaion Road through the Agora (marketplace) into the heart of Corinth. Two Jews befriended Paul and invited him to share their trade for making much needed money. Aquilla and Priscilla were tent-makers, which was Paul’s trade as well (Acts 18:3). With his usual pattern of going to the Jew first, Paul “argued in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:4) but when the Jews rejected Paul’s message he shook out his garments and went out to the Gentiles. God told him to stay in Corinth and not to be afraid, so Paul “stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them” (Acts 18:11).

With the help of Silas and Timothy (Acts 18:5), Paul taught them from the Jewish scriptures and from the rapidly developing tradition. The New Testament did not yet exist. And when Paul eventually left Corinth he did not leave them a handbook of the faith nor a manual for liturgy, but a tradition. Years later he wrote, “I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you (1 Cor 11:2).

Paul eventually left Corinth and almost five years later from Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8) he wrote a lengthy letter back to Corinth—the letter we know as First Corinthians. But, there was actually an earlier letter written by Paul to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 5:9 Paul recalls, “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men.” This is obviously a letter from Paul and which has been lost. Consider how interesting it would be to discover that lost epistle!

Paul had taught the Corinthians the faith and had established the tradition (cp. 2 Thes 2:15; 3:6). Now he is writing in response to a letter from them (1 Cor 7:1) and from the witness of problems relayed by others (1 Cor 1:11). 1 Corinthians is actually a “memo” to correct the Corinthian church and bring them back in line with Paul’s tradition. Was First Corinthians simply a letter of a wise and trusted man or did Paul actually have the mind of God (cp. 1 Cor 7:10, 12, 25, 40)? We know, as the Catholic Church has always forcefully taught, that Paul’s words were inspired by the Holy Spirit, infallible and the inerrant word of God (CCC 105).

There has never been a Golden Age in the Church. It is easy to look at the contemporary Church and think “If we could only go back to the good ol’ days of the Apostles and the early Church.” What a minute! Reading First Corinthians makes it quite clear that they had their own set of problems needing the clear voice of God through the magisterium—apostolic authority.

Peter had been to Corinth and Apollos had followed Paul. It now now reported to Paul that the church in Corinth was divided. Some claimed Paul, others claimed to follow Apollos or Peter. Others, attempting to rise about the fray claimed, claimed Christ. But Paul condemned schisms. He wrote, “I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. . . . Is Christ divided? (1 Cor 1:10, 13) The Greek word Paul uses for “dissensions” is actually the Greek *schisma* from which we get our word schism. It is the word used for the tearing of a garment. There is only one, singular Church (Eph 4:4; Mt 18:17 1 Cor 12:12(13). Paul condemns divisions—denominationalism.

In this Paul’s longest letter, he writes from his heart more than any other except possibly for 2 Corinthians. Romans is a doctrinal treatise of powerful theological argument written to largely unknown readers. To the Corinthians, on the other hand, Paul pours out his heart to brethren and friends, and infuses his beloved readers with wisdom and correction. His poetic exhortation on love is one of the most exquisite compositions in any language. Chapter 13 is known as the “Love Chapter” in which Paul explains that all

the gifts, spiritual or otherwise, eloquence, faith and sacrifice all melt to nothing compared to charity, the love we show God and one another.

Immorality was rampant in Corinth and Paul addresses the holy life demanded of Christians. Chapter 7 is the “Marriage Chapter” and here we learn much about Christian marriage, but also about celibacy. Paul, knowing the difficult sexual situation in Corinth states, “because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband” (1 Cor 7:2). In a culture where men owned their wives as property, Paul reveals that in Christian marriage “the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does (1 Cor 7:4). This teaching was counter-cultural and radical and laid the foundation for new views of women and society. Far from dominating and repressing women, the words of Paul set them free.

Paul also addresses the unmarried, challenging them to be content in their state of life. One who is married is concerned about temporal things whereas the unmarried can devote themselves fully to the Lord. This passage plays no small part in the Church’s teaching on priestly celibacy. The spiritual gifts, public worship, the Lord’s Supper, and practical matters of life are discussed in great detail as well.

Paul concludes this magnificent letter in chapter 15 with one of the most important passages in the New Testament—the “Resurrection Chapter”. Tying the gospel into verifiable history—quite the opposite of the mythical gods of Greece and Rome—Paul affirms the actual and real bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. If there is no resurrection from the dead, we are of all men the most to be pitied. Was it just a good story, just a mythical episode? No. Paul tells us of witnesses of the resurrection, most still living (1 Cor 15:3–8). He calls them to the witness stand to testify to the truth of the physical resurrection of Christ. Then Paul, the revealer of mysteries, one who has himself visited the third heaven (2 Cor 12:2), explains the power of the resurrection and nature of the spiritual bodies we will proudly possess in glory.

Paul’s prayers, letters, tradition, and frequent visits boosted the Corinthian church into the next century. Second Corinthians, which we will discuss in the next issue, is full of personal insights into Paul’s life and apostolate and his labor for the Corinthians. We know from writings of the next few centuries that the church in Corinth continued faithful to the gospel, though not without continuing problems and difficulties.

Text Boxes:

“Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

“As a wealthy hub for commerce and seafarers, Greek Corinth was evidently renowned for its vice, especially its sexual corruption, and for its many religious temples and rites.

Aristophanes (c. 450–385 BC) even coined the term korinthiazesthai (“to act like a Corinthian,” i.e., “to commit fornication”) in view of the city’s reputation. Plato used the term “Corinthian girl” as an euphemism for a prostitute. And although its historical accuracy is disputed, Strabo’s account of 1,000 prostitutes in the temple of Aphrodite does reflect the city’s image, in which the many temples played their own role in the immoral tenor of its life (cf. Strabo Geog. 8.6.20, first written in 7 BC and revised slightly in a.d. 18)” (*Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*).

“You have also, by your very admonition, brought together the planting that was made by Peter and Paul at Rome and at Corinth; for both of them alike planted in our Corinth and taught us; and both alike, teaching similarly in Italy, suffered martyrdom at the same time.” (*The Letter of Dionysius of Corinth to Soter of Rome* quoted in Eusebius 2, 25, 8 in Jurgens’ *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, 1:45).

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor 15:3–9).

“For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:9–13).