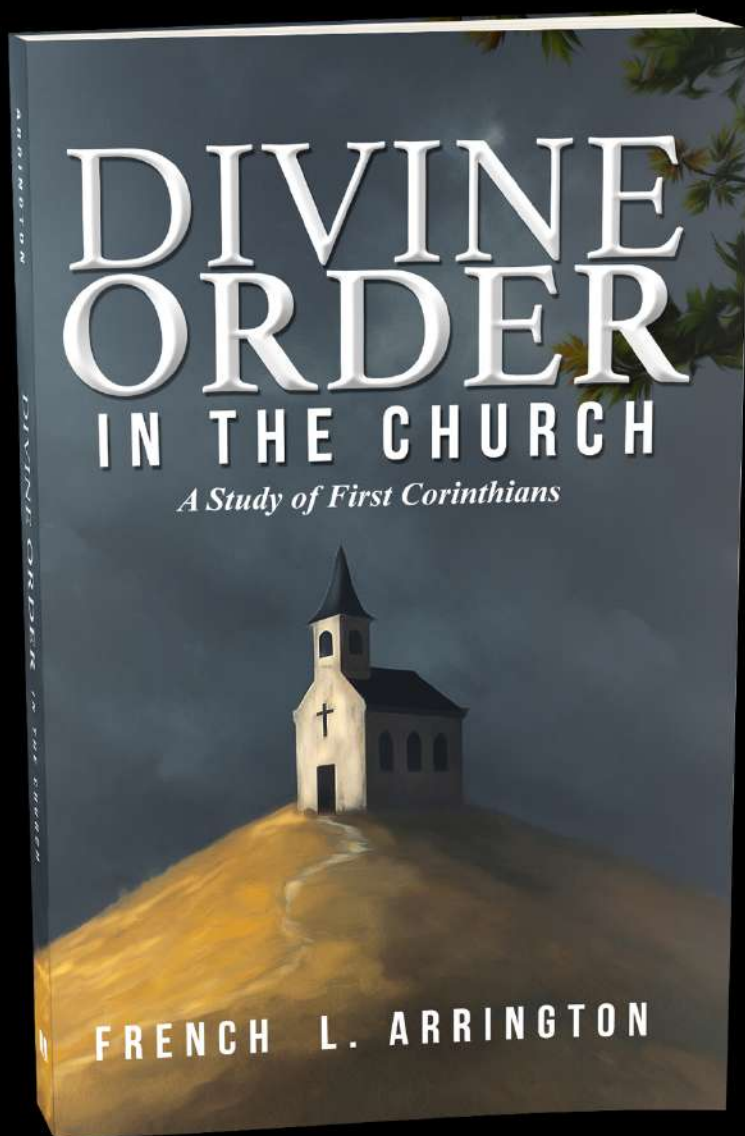


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CHAPTER 1

THE CITY AND THE CHURCH

Grave troubles were in the church at Corinth. Paul, the founder of that church, was called upon to deal with an extraordinary array of difficulties among the Corinthian converts. After his initial stay there, he carried on an extended correspondence with them in which he offered instructions that would hopefully set the affairs of the church in order.

One of his epistles to them is now known as First Corinthians. Fittingly, the emphasis of that entire epistle is practical Christian living. The converts from paganism found it exceedingly difficult to understand the high moral standards of the Gospel and to overcome the besetting temptation of their former lifestyle. By grappling with the deteriorating circumstances in which they were enmeshed, Paul provided an unparalleled view of the everyday life in an early first-century church and of his endeavor to give spiritual direction to an unruly congregation.

If we appreciate the relevance of 1 Corinthians for our day, we must first understand its meaning for Paul's day. One way to gain a proper perspective is to examine the atmosphere that persisted in Corinth in the middle of the first century and to determine the nature of the urgent problems facing the Corinthian believers. Hopefully, the following discussion will give us a picture of the conditions at Corinth.

THE CITY OF CORINTH

Corinth has been called “the Vanity Fair in the ancient world.” To say the least, licentious excesses were commonplace. The character of the city and its inhabitants were reflected in the Corinthian believers and helped create the troubles in the local Christian community. Paul had preached to them the word of the Cross (1 Cor. 15:1-4), which is able to transform life. The ultimate success of Christianity in Corinth is a tribute to the power of the Gospel. A number of factors made that pagan city what it was when Paul first arrived there.

Its History. Corinth had existed for more than a thousand years before Paul’s time, and was one of the famous and important cities of the ancient world. In 146 BC the city was reduced to ashes by the Roman general Lucius Mummius. The residents were either killed or sold into slavery. Because rebuilding was forbidden, the city lay in ruins for a century; but Julius Caesar recognized its strategic military value. At his command, the city was rebuilt in 46-44 BC. At first the citizens of the new city were Roman freedmen, but the population quickly became cosmopolitan and included a community of Jews. So there the East met the West and freely exchanged their ideas and ideals and material goods. By the time of Paul, the city had become the capital of the Roman province of Achaia which, along with the province of Macedonia, encompassed the whole of Greece.

The new Corinth was three and one-half miles northeast of the old city. By the time Paul arrived (AD 50-52), the population of the city had grown to 500,000. Other than its location in the same general area, the new city at first had little similarity to the old. No sooner had the city been rebuilt than it began to develop its individuality and regain much of its earlier greatness. In 1859 the ruins of the old city were destroyed by an earthquake. If we were to visit the site of ancient Corinth today, we would see a few columns of the temple of Apollo, the Greek god of poetry and prophecy.

These columns stand as a mute testimony to the city before it was leveled to the ground by Mummius.

Its Geography. Few cities were located in a more impressive setting. A look at the map will show that Corinth was a city of Greece and stood on a four-mile-wide strip of land, called an *isthmus* (from the Greek, especially for “a neck of land between two seas”). If there had been no isthmus, the southern part of Greece would have been an island.

As well as forming a long bridge between the north and south, the isthmus was an important link for ocean-going vessels between east and west. Until the completion of the Corinth Canal in 1893¹ merchants and sailors preferred to haul their cargoes across the isthmus rather than endure the long trip and risk the dangerous waters around the southern tip of Greece.² Small ships and cargo from large ships were transported safely over the small strip of land by a form of trolley car on crude wooden rails.

Corinth was a crossroads. All the traffic from the north and from the south in Greece had to pass through the city. Through it also flowed much of the traffic between the east and west. So the Corinth that Paul marched into was in one of the greatest trading and commerce centers in the Roman Empire. Competition in business was keen. The minds of the people dwelt on moneymaking, and the order of the day was buying and selling in the marketplace.

Furthermore, the city of Corinth was situated in quite a metropolitan area. Athens was less than fifty miles away. Around Corinth clustered three towns: just one and one-half miles to the north lay

¹ In A.D. 67 Nero with forced labor, including Jewish captives attempted to cut a canal through the isthmus but without success.

²The treachery and distance of a voyage around the Greek peninsula were well known, as indicated by the proverb: “Let him who sails around Malea first make his will” (quoted by William Barclay in *The Letters to the Corinthians*).

Lechaeum; seven and one-half miles to the east, Cenchrea; just a short distance away, Schoenus. Both Lechaeum and Cenchrea had a harbor, giving Corinth a seaport on each side.

The city was a sailor's paradise. Much like some of the urban centers in modern America, Corinth was known for its flourishing wealth and pleasure. What New York and San Francisco are to the United States, what Paris is to France, and what Hong Kong is to the Orient, Corinth was to Macedonia and Asia Minor. It was a boomtown, a crossroads of travel and commerce. There competition in business was fierce. Sparing no means, men and women fought to gain the spoils of prosperity. Reckless individualism was the Corinthian ideal. Nothing was barred. They recognized no law but their own desires.

The city needed the purifying influence of the Gospel. No doubt, Paul was aware of its lurid reputation, but that was not the overriding factor that brought him to Corinth. Its geographical location was what induced Paul to preach the Gospel there. Much of the population of the city was mobile. Merchants and travelers came and went. The situation of Corinth made it the ideal place to establish a church. From that important center could radiate the Gospel unto the surrounding regions. So it was certain that Paul's preaching would have wide circulation.

Its Notoriety. Corinth was a city of wealth and pleasure. The ancient city destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC had become the butt of jokes. The debauchery of Corinth was proverbial; the term *Corinthianize* was coined to refer to licentious excesses. The morals of the people were deplorably low; the name of the city became a synonym for immorality, debauchery, and vice. It was said that those who led loose and scandalous lives played the Corinthian.

Unfortunately, by Paul's time Corinth had regained its fame for wickedness, and the same atmosphere that had prevailed in the ancient city prevailed in Paul's day. Prominent among the

problems that Paul had to deal with was laxity in sexual matters. So the morals of the new city were no better than the old.

To use modern parlance, Corinth was a haven for playboys and prostitutes. On the highest point in the city stood the pagan temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty and love. Attached to that temple were a thousand women prostitutes serving as priestesses. At evening time these women went into Corinth to ply their trade and to entertain in the night life of the city. The people of Corinth, therefore, were notoriously profligate. They laughed at wickedness rather than restraining it, and turned freedom into license. No doubt, some of the residents were repulsed by the evils and the lust in the city, but apparently they lacked the influence and stamina to resist the plague of immorality, vice, debauchery, and filth.

Corinthian society was thoroughly pagan. Every man chose his own philosophy of life, and his religion permitted him to do whatever he desired with a clear conscience. No one took his philosophy too seriously. Free thinking and intellectual superficiality were common. Shallow thought was apparent in childish conceit and love for skillful words and philosophical jargon.

Wealth was the supreme god. The reckless wastefulness of those who had money made the place so expensive that it became a saying, "It is not for everyone to go to Corinth." With wealth they could have done much good—promoted art and literature and improved life in general or helped the less fortunate, many of whom barely existed, living in the wretchedness of extreme poverty. All of these uses for money would have been noble, but none of them were the overriding motive behind the Corinthians' unrestrained enthusiasm for moneymaking. Wealth was the means to pleasure—to wine, women, and song. For the most part, the Corinthians were occupied with "making money and making love."³ Thus, in an atmosphere laden with moral corruption, it is

³ Cited by Russell P. Spittler, *The Corinthian Correspondence*, p. 11.

little wonder that the early believers in Corinth were, to some extent, affected by the prevailing influence.

PAUL'S MINISTRY IN CORINTH

The church was founded by Paul, probably about AD 50. On his second missionary journey, he arrived in Corinth from Athens (Acts 18:1-18). He became fast friends with a godly couple, Aquila and Priscilla, who were among the Jews recently expelled from Rome by an anti-Semitic decree of Emperor Claudius. Like Paul, they were tentmakers. While in Corinth, Paul supported himself by working with Aquila and Priscilla at their common craft (1 Cor. 9:14, 15; 2 Cor. 12:13). Too, he took lodging with them, and they became his coworkers in the Gospel.

Paul remained in town for about two years. As his custom was, he sought out the synagogue. There, from Sabbath to Sabbath, he preached Jesus as the Christ. When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia to help him, he gave himself exclusively to preaching the Gospel. His labors were richly rewarded. Both Jews and Gentile proselytes were convinced and believed. This included even Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, along with his family (Acts 18:4, 8). Can we imagine two groups, Jews and Christians, going to the same place at the same time to worship? Indeed, there were problems. Paul himself was forced by the Jews from the synagogue. He left with the declaration: "Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles" (Acts 18:6).

The apostle moved his ministry into the home of Justus, which was near the Jewish synagogue. When Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and others deserted the Jewish synagogue to join the Christian fellowship next door, feelings against the Christians must have become intense. An encouraging vision was granted to Paul in which God assured him that many would be converted through his ministry.

The Corinthian mission continued. Finally the Jews' bitterness toward Paul expressed itself in a threat on his life. They brought him before the Roman proconsul, Gallio, and complained that he was advising people to worship God contrary to the law of Moses. Knowing Roman law, the proconsul recognized that the charges were not concerned with a misdemeanor or a serious crime and that Paul was no lawbreaker. The dispute was one of questions of their own law. So Gallio showed no concern whatsoever and refused to hear the case.

After that the apostle stayed on in Corinth for some time. But the Holy Spirit moved him to turn his eyes on the province of Asia. With Aquila and Priscilla, he departed from Corinth and stopped briefly at Ephesus, a metropolis of Asia, where he left his two friends. Then he set sail for Antioch in Syria.

One other visit is recorded in the Book of Acts (20:1-3). On his third missionary journey, Paul revisited the city of Corinth. No details of that visit are given, but it was just prior to his final visit to Jerusalem. Some are convinced that Paul's second visit was his last time in Corinth. However, in 2 Corinthians 13:1, he spoke as if his last visit was a third visit. It is not completely clear that he came to Corinth for a third visit. He did postpone a visit so that he might not be present to blame them more severely (2 Cor. 1:23).

THE CHURCH AT CORINTH

The Corinthian Church was a problem congregation. There was discrepancy between the Lord and His church. Many among the Corinthian believers had gone astray from Christian living, proper order in worship, and sound doctrine. Paul, their father in the Lord, recognized that the moral health and spiritual life of the church were threatened. Our understanding of the dangers should be enhanced by noting the social classes and groups in the Corinthian congregation and the errors that developed among them.

Its Different Groups. The Corinthian Church was comprised of many different groups, each of which followed the natural tendency to blend old habits and beliefs with their Christian experience. From Paul's writing, we discern that there were both Jews and Gentiles in the church, the latter perhaps being predominant.

No doubt, among the members of the community were freedmen and slaves (1 Cor. 7:21). It is clear that the members came largely from the lower classes (1 Cor. 1:26; 6:11; 7:21). There were not many among them wise by human standards, not many influential and powerful, and not many nobly born (1 Cor. 1:26). God had delighted in making "somebodies" out of "nobodies."

However, a few of the Christians there were prominent people. Among them were Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and Erastus and Gaius, men of prominence and means (Acts 18:8; Rom. 16:23). Therefore, the congregation included Jews and Gentiles, bond and free, rich and poor, and educated and ignorant. That was as it should have been. The Gospel is for all people, regardless of their station in life.

Its Troubles. For Paul the Christian fellowship at Corinth was a source of joy and trial. He addressed the fellowship as "the church of God . . . sanctified in Christ . . . called to be saints" (1 Cor. 1:2). But the believers' religious and philosophical differences created problems for the young church; such as factions among them, the belief that the kingdom of God had fully come and that they were already living in the end-time,⁴ abuse of Christian freedom, and vying with one another in exercising spiritual gifts. All of these troubled Paul.

Since the habits of paganism clung to many, there was no clear-cut break with the world. "The Church was in the world, as it had

⁴ Note especially 1 Corinthians 4:8. Furthermore, for an exposition that understands that all the problems dealt with in 1 Corinthians are symptoms of the problem of over-realized eschatology, see French L. Arrington, *Paul's Aeon Theology in 1 Corinthians*.

to be, but the world was in the Church, as it ought not to be.”⁵ So the influence of the pagan city and diverse elements in the church tended to rip it apart.

Cliques or parties had been formed with the church. The snobbish factions rallied around the names of Paul, Apollos, Peter, or even of Christ, and pledged their loyalty to one or the other.

Too, there was a case of the worst kind of fornication among them. Viewing it as harmless, the church had taken no steps to discipline the offender.

There were also some Christians that took one another into courts, and others were guilty of sexual impurity.

Such gross sins had crept into the church. To make matters worse, there were irregularities in worship and sound doctrine, particularly the resurrection of the dead. Paul was called upon to deal with grave evils and to offer spiritual guidance directed to the immediate needs of the Corinthian Church. Paul dealt with these problems, which have a way of recurring in every age and every place. But, more importantly, he offered the basis for meaningful and holy living.

This is seen in a number of specifics. First, he offered Christ, the sum and substance of the Gospel. Second, he offered a way of life that makes us responsible for what we do and the influence we have on others. Third, he offered the power of the crucified, risen Christ to enable us to live in harmony with one another. Fourth, he offered a spirit of tolerance and mutual upbuilding, grounded in redemptive love. Fifth, he offered a program of stewardship and unselfish service.

These great truths will be amplified as we study Paul’s challenge to the Corinthians to bring their lives into conformity with their

⁵ James Moffatt, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians (The Moffatt New Testament Commentary)*, p. xv.

high position in Christ. What a challenge the truths of the Gospel were to the Christians in the pagan city of Corinth! What a challenge they are to us in our pagan world!

THE OCCASION AND PURPOSE

This epistle was written on the apostle's third missionary journey. At the climax of his second missionary journey, he established the church at Corinth. Then he returned to his home church in Antioch of Syria by way of Ephesus. "After he had spent some time there, he departed, and went over all the country of Galatia and Phrygia . . . strengthening all the disciples" (Acts 18:23). This began his third missionary journey.

During Paul's absence from Ephesus, Apollos, an Alexandrian Jew, visited that city and met Aquila and Priscilla. After they expounded to him more accurately the way of God, he traveled to Corinth where he probably served as pastor for several months (Acts 18:24-28).

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul arrived in Ephesus, where he ministered for the next three years. Many believe that shortly after Paul reached Ephesus, he sent a short letter, now lost, to the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 5:9). Scholars refer to it as "the previous letter." We are not certain of the problems dealt with in the missing letter, but the gist of them is reflected in the admonition "not to . . . [associate] with fornicators." The troubles at Corinth became more aggravated. Because of this, Apollos left the city and joined Paul in Ephesus.

The situation at Corinth continued to degenerate. Soon members of the household of Chloe arrived in Ephesus from Corinth with a firsthand report about the troubled state of their home church (1 Cor. 1:11). Boasts were made that wisdom was imparted to the spirituals, not to ordinary men. Such pretentious claims created fiery antagonisms. The church was on the verge of shattering, with each faction zealously devoted to a different leader—Paul,

Peter, Apollos, or Christ. Each faction thought of itself as the spiritual elite. This led them to disdain others and to jeopardize the existence of the church (1 Cor. 1:10—4:21).

Moreover, one member of the congregation was living with his stepmother without objection from the church (1 Cor. 5:1-13). Some Christians were suing one another in pagan court (1 Cor. 6:1-8). Others were patronizing houses of ill-fame (1 Cor. 6:9-20).

The first six chapters of 1 Corinthians dealt with the oral report by Chloe's people. In the remaining chapters, Paul shifted his attention to a letter from the Corinthians. Someone had the idea of bringing Paul back into the picture and sent him a letter. Perhaps the letter was brought by the hands of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, who were members of the congregation at Corinth (1 Cor. 16:17). In it, various questions were asked about such moral and doctrinal matters as marriage, contact with the world, worship, and the Resurrection. Therefore, by conversations with Apollos, Chloe's people, and the three church members (plus the content of the letter), Paul learned about the troubles in the church.

At that time Paul was unable to leave Ephesus. He pleaded with Apollos to return to Corinth, but to no avail (1 Cor. 16:12). Sensing the problems were urgent enough to require an immediate answer, he wrote 1 Corinthians. The Epistle was probably composed near the end of Paul's stay at Ephesus (Acts 19:1, 21), because he had already made plans to visit Corinth (1 Cor. 16:5). It is impossible to determine the exact year of composition, but it was "not earlier than 55 and not later than 57."⁶

The purpose of this significant epistle is clear. In the interest of unity, Paul rebuked the dissensions, disorders, and errors among the believers and answered a letter of inquiry from Corinth. He

⁶ *Ibid.*

DIVINE ORDER IN THE CHURCH

dealt with their problems with the reminder that “God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints” (1 Cor. 14:33). He gave explicit instructions as to how they may ensure that “all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40). To put it another way, 1 Corinthians offers the prescription for divine order in the church.

The problems that this inspired epistle addresses were problems in the first-century church, particularly at Corinth; but, in one form or another, they still more or less are common to the church today. It is as urgent now as it was then that in the church all things be done in a becoming and orderly manner.

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