

## **Churches Nearer Heaven Corinth—Overcoming Cultural Influences**

**Intro:** In every age one of the greatest challenges of the people of God is to overcome the cultural influences around them. Perhaps no church illustrates that challenge greater than the church at Corinth. To learn about this church is to become aware of how many ways the church at Corinth continued to struggle to overcome its pagan culture.

### **The Establishment of the church at Corinth**

*Luke reports that Paul traveled to Corinth on his second preaching journey arriving there around AD 51. After an unsuccessful attempt to reach the Jews of the synagogue Paul taught people in the house of Titius Justus with good results.*

*And Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized. (Acts 18:8)*

*This was an encouraging start; but there were significant cultural challenges to overcome.*

### **Cultural Background of the Corinthians**

*A religiously diverse culture where idolatry was well-entrenched*

In the ruins of ancient Corinth one can still see the remains of numerous temples to Greek deities and Roman rulers. Among them:

*A temple to the god of the silver bow, Apollo*

*A temple to Hera, the consort of Zeus*

*An Asclepion the Greek version of a hospital where people came to seek cures from Asclepius, the god of healing*

*On the top of the Acropolis was the famous Temple of Aphrodite.*

*In addition Roman traveler Pausanius mentions numerous other images in the market place and the surrounding area that are no longer visible (Artemis of Ephesus, gilded statues of Dionysus with painted faces, bronzes of Apollo, Zeus, Hermes, Athena, statue of Aphrodite). On the way up to the Acropolis he identified precincts devoted to Isis and Serapis, temples to the mother of the gods, to Fates, Demeter, and Hera and various altars and sanctuaries.*

*Can you see why Paul said what he did about another city, Athens not too far away? I see that you are in all respects very religious!*

In addition there were numerous shrines to the Roman family such as the Temple of Octavia (sister to Augustus Caesar)

Corinth, though a Roman colony, was a city where both Greek gods and Roman emperors and their families were worshipped like gods.

*A city where moral standards were very loose*

Perhaps the location of Corinth made it particularly vulnerable to sexual immorality. Located not far from the harbor of Cenchrea it was a place where many sailors from many places passed through with time on their hands. And that meant that a culture of moral corruption could easily develop.

The ancient Greeks had such a low view of Corinthians that when they wanted to speak of a morally loose person, they actually used a word that means to “play the Corinthian”.

In the period prior to the first century ancient writers affirmed that temple prostitutes served those who came to the temple of Aphrodite on the Acropolis. Whether the practice continued in first century Corinth is uncertain; but it is not unlikely that the practice of sexual immorality in a religious setting in connection with the temples in Corinth continued. In addition, there is evidence that dinner parties among the Greek men often resulted in heavy drinking and fornication with female entertainers provided for the occasion.

***A city where competition prevailed in almost all spheres***

Corinth was a town made up of people from varying social strata and higher classes would take advantage of their wealth and social positions.

From ancient times Corinth had been a center of philosophy and rhetoric. Many skilled speakers passed through town seeking by means of their rhetorical skills to win a position as teacher among the wealthy who could pay for their services. Great stress was placed upon rhetorical skills of teachers and competition developed around who was best.

Witherington points out that Corinth had cultivated a “reputation of being one of the most competitive of all cities, even in economic matters” (Conflict and Community in Corinth). It was a city of unprincipled profit-takers who would stop at little or nothing to outdo their rivals.

**Challenges facing the Corinthian church**

***Knowing the background makes us appreciate even more Paul’s work in Corinth. One cannot read Paul’s first epistle to Corinth without becoming aware of the ongoing problems of the Christians in making a clean break from their past pagan culture.***

***Paul wrote three chapters of 1 Corinthians to deal with the influences of idolatry (8-10). He urged the church to:***

Flee idolatry recognizing the sin involved in participating in idolatrous worship.

*Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. (1 Corinthians 10:14).*

Paul would make several practical applications:

Do not participate in the ritual meals offered to idols in the temples (1 Cor. 10:14-22).

Avoid associations and activities in idols temples that might cause others to stumble (1 Cor. 8:1-13)

Freely eat meat purchased in the meat market regardless of its source (some came from pagan temples); but refuse the hospitality of people in private dinners where the meal is served in honor to a god (1 Cor. 10:23-11:1).

Clearly some of the Christians were struggling with these issues.

***Paul had to address the problem of sexual immorality among the Christian men (chapter 5-6).***

Most Bible students will readily remember the case of the incestuous marriage of the man of 1 Cor. 5 and the church's toleration of the situation. But in addition, it appears that Paul in 1 Cor. 6 was addressing an argument posed by those who were continuing to practice sexual immorality after their conversion to Christ.

*Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:18-20)*

The common practice of fornication among Greco-Roman men presented a challenge to men seeking to serve the Lord.

***Paul had to address the problem of division over teachers and the appeal of intellectualism.***

The church had cliques over who had taught and baptized them. The church seemed to have been influenced by the wisdom or rhetorical skills of their respective teachers and who might be the greater teacher. *Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." (1 Cor. 1:12)* Paul argued that he deliberately avoided using such means to impress others with himself, a common tendency for those seeking to advance their own interests in society.

*And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:1-2)*

Instead he urged them to have a harmonious and unified attitude toward each other.

*Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. (1 Corinthians 1:10)*

***Other examples could be given. But clearly we can see that the challenge for the Corinthians was to lay aside these previously accepted norms of living and adjust to their newly embraced faith in the Lordship of Jesus Christ. And the good news is that for most of the members Paul's instructions were***

*accepted with genuine godly sorrow and repentance, so that Paul could later say:*

*I rejoice that in everything I have confidence in you. (2 Corinthians 7:16)*

**An application for our time**

*It is interesting that ancient Corinth in many ways serves as a prototype of our own society. We today face many of the issues that the Corinthians faced.*

Religious pluralism. Today the politically correct view of religion is to accept all of them as legitimate expressions of faith and disapprove of none.

Increasing moral liberalism. Today the politically correct view of morality is to embrace moral relativism and refrain from judging the morality of another's conduct. Whatever you feel is right for you is right, we are told.

Intimidating intellectualism. Increasing intellectualism can easily displace the wisdom of God's statements. Modern science replaces the outmoded answers of traditional religion.

*Like the church at Corinth we too must resist the tendency to "political correctness". Instead we too must embrace the authority of Jesus and His teaching. We must affirm:*

Christ as the only way of salvation

God word as an absolute standard of morality.

Acceptance of God's word on how the world came into being or how one should live.

**Conclusion: The challenge of God's people has always been to overcome cultural influences. Instead of being captured by the culture, we must to strive to set the pace for the culture showing them the right way to view life.**