

## Background of Acts 18

Paul came to Corinth from Athens, after attempting to reasonably and eloquently defend the gospel on the Athenian Areopagus. He had tried to cleverly contextualize the gospel by fitting it into the Greek worldview, drawing allusions to their own worldview and even quoting their own respected authors, but it fell flat when he mentioned the authority of Jesus Christ to judge “the living and the dead” as one whom God ‘raised from the dead.’ This appeal fell flat. “Some” believed. Yet, we know that Luke is usually demonstrative in his wording when there is great success, i.e. “no small dissension” (Acts 15:20). Thus, when he comes to Corinth, he has given up on contextualization and trying to make the gospel fit into the worldview of Corinth. Thus, he mentions 4 times in the first two chapters that he didn’t come with persuasive words of wisdom. “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with eloquent words of wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” (1:17) “And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” (2:4-5) He came preaching Christ crucified and completely sufficient for all things, beginning in the synagogue and moving to the Gentiles. Acts 18 shows us what that first ministry in Corinth looked like.

Paul comes to Corinth alone. Silas and Timothy had been left behind. Athens was a lonely road, standing before the wisest of Greek culture by himself. Now, in Corinth, he meets Aquila, a fellow Jew and tentmaker who has lived in Rome. They become fast friends, along with Priscilla, Aquila’s wife. They work together, and Paul preaches. They are bound together by faith in Jesus, and soon joined by Timothy and Silas, a team of 5 works to plant a church in Corinth through the proclamation of the Word of God.

Paul sought to minister to those with a background in God’s working in history as revealed through the Old Testament, i.e. in the synagogue, but was rejected. Paul responds with hard words of judgment, “Your blood be on your own heads!” He had stood between the holy God and sinful men and proclaimed the way of salvation, but they would not hear it. So, he left them to their desires and moved next door.

Paul moved directly next door to teach in a Greek school in between the regular teaching hours of Titius Justus’ teaching. He believed that disciples of Jesus are made through preaching the Word of God. And “many” were (v8), as opposed to Athens. Crispus, a leader of the synagogue and his family believed, as did Sosthenes, the next leader, eventually. Isn’t this interesting? Think about what it took for Crispus to come to Jesus? The glory of Jesus outshines the glory given by man. So, the leader of the dissenting group comes to faith in Jesus, so they elect a new leader, and then he (Sosthenes) comes to faith in Jesus! Do we pray for this kind of thing? Do we ask God for the redemption and conversion of the leaders of those who oppose the Word of God? Many Greeks also came to faith through this, as well as many Jews in Corinth. You see, there is always hope for the movement of God anywhere, even when rejected by a whole, God moves to redeem some.

The Jewish leaders tried to drag Paul before the tribunal (bema seat), but Gallio (Seneca’s brother) refused to have anything to do with what he considered to be a religious disagreement between Jews and set Paul free. In response to this, the Jewish synagogue dragged Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, out into the street and beat him. Why did they beat him? We don’t know for sure, but it must be that he showed mercy to Paul and openness to the gospel of Jesus. The gospel divides, sometimes violently, but it always divides from other worldviews as that which is hated.

God revealed to Paul that he would be unharmed in Corinth, so he was to stay on and preach and teach because God had many people there [election]. Thus, he stayed for 18 months, and met Apollos who was a supremely gifted teacher and preacher. The Corinthian church was very gifted, but needed to grow in grace.

Located on an isthmus 4 miles wide, the city of Corinth was a master of two harbors **[map insert]**: one bearing to Italy, and one bearing to Asia. “A great lighthouse and Temple to Poseidon guided ships into the harbors, to fill the city markets and the warehouses down on the wharves with merchandise from the around the empire and beyond -- spices from India, silk from China, linen from Tarsus, local Corinthian marble and variegated marble from Turkey, Greece, and North Africa, timber from Italy, and wine and olive oil, fruits and vegetables from fertile fields of Corinth.” (pbs.org) Traders would have their boats dragged the 4 miles across the isthmus in a small channel created for the purpose (*diolkos*) **[insert pic]**. It was quicker and less dangerous to drag the boats on dry land than it was to sail the 200 miles around the southern end of Greece. A canal was planned by Nero, who even broke ground with a golden shovel, but he abandoned the project. The canal was always a prospect through the middle ages, but did not come to fruition until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century **[insert canal pic]**. So, for the time it took the workers to drag a ship 4 miles across land, people had some time to spend their money.

It became a very cosmopolitan center with an immense amount of wealth and luxury. The agora, or “public market”, was the largest in the Roman world **[insert agora pic]**. In fact, according to the Greek historian and geographer Strabo (63BC-24AD), the city was so wealthy that the Temple of Aphrodite employed over 1,000 women as prostitutes and entertainers, so many sailors “easily spent everything they had” as they waited for their ships to be dragged the 4 miles across the isthmus. It may have been populated by as many as 100,000 people in Paul’s day.

Corinth has roots into the Stone Age, and had been a great Greek city from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC until the Romans destroyed it in 146BC. It was rebuilt by Julius Caesar around 46BC, and sprung up quickly because of the location for great commerce. Strabo refers to Corinth as being repopulated with mostly Roman freedmen and Jews. Outsiders given an opportunity to make it in this world. Roman Corinth was, then, a land of opportunity to pursue and procure what you wanted. For the community of new Christians, then, the question was, “What do you want?” The functional answer to that question is what bound the Corinthian church in the situation to which Paul writes and what welds us to our own.

It was, if you can imagine, filled with a certain kind of person. Though it had a great history and storied traditions, it no longer had long lines of powerful families who had lived there for eons. It was full of people who came to Corinth to “make it.” There were former slaves and soldiers who had been set free. The wealth of the city also allured philosophers looking for patronage (financial supporters). This is why money and support became a talking point between these types and Paul’s apostleship. Wealth, newfound power, ease of comforts and pleasures, opportunity to build one’s own name and property are all things which drew so many diverse peoples to come to Corinth. They were the ones who pushed for success, longed for reputation, worked hard for glory, and played hard to glory in themselves. In a way, I imagine it was much like early America, being forced ahead by an air of determination, ingenuity, and a firm belief that you can accomplish your own dreams if you work hard enough. It held the biennial Isthmian Games **[insert Isthmian pic]**, second only in prominence of competition to the Olympic Games of Athens. Thus, Paul uses this contextualization to refer to victors’ wreaths **[insert wreath pic]** (9:25) and making every effort to win, but in the proper realm.

Along with such determined and persistent people and the growth of wealth and opportunity which it provided came an excess of luxuries as well. With the huge Temple of Aphrodite atop a central monolith

called the Acrocorinth **[insert pic]**. Prostitution was common, so the Corinthian church had asked Paul if sexual relationships outside of marriage were permissible. The Church, though the Church, still had a lot of Corinth in it. Sexual immorality was rampant, from adultery and prostitution, to homosexuality and cultic prostitution, and even incest were things which the Corinthians approved. In fact, ancient Greek writers were so aware of the extravagance of Corinth's sexual promiscuity that they coined a term, *Corinthiazomai*, to describe such wanton lust. It meant to have sexual experiences outside of marriage. Corinth approved of the things which God did not and even the recognition of other Greek and Roman cities, not known for sexual purity, recognized Corinthians as being excessive in sexual promiscuity.

Not everything was immoral or ugly, of course. Corinth was a leader in schools and arts along with Sparta and Athens. The movement from the Doric to Ionic periods of Greek and Roman architecture to the Corinthian is a well-known transition. **[insert Corinthian pillar pic]** Many of you have heard of Corinthian pillars, considered to be the most ornate of the ancient styles, with slender columns and intricately carved capitals. Our own government adopted this style for our Capitol Building in Washington. Corinth was known for its nature motifs on mosaics and pottery and many fine marble sculptures have been excavated from ancient Corinth. There was an artistic emphasis vines, Bacchus, and thus drunkenness and pleasure, which fits with Corinth's general demeanor. **[mosaic insert]** Erastus, the "city treasurer", written of by Paul to the Romans (which was written from Corinth) was a believer of wealth and power whom Paul considered a good man. His name is still written in the stones of Corinth, which you can view if you go there now **[Erastus Stone pic]**.

Corinth had many temples of many different gods as well as a Jewish synagogue. The synagogue's lintel has been excavated **[insert synagogue lintel pic]**, reading "-agoge Ebr-" There was the Temple of Aphrodite, the Temple of Apollo (some 3 dozen Doric pillars still stand today) **[insert pic]**, the Temple of Octavian (built for Caesar Augustus' sister, part of the Imperial Cult of Emperor worship), and there is the Sanctuary of Asklepeion (god of healing, medicine, people left clay votive offerings of body parts needing to be healed near the fountain, many of which have been excavated) **[insert pic]**. The Roman historian Pausanias notes that there were 26 sacred sites in the city, from temples to the Greek/Roman pantheon (gods many) and sanctuaries to the cult personalities (lords many). It was a city built on newfound freedom and the opportunity to gain the whole world. Sex, money, and power were the coinage of the culture.

A church made up of Jewish Christians, with a Jewish background, and Greek Christians, with a pagan background, created many problems on what the church is supposed to be and what the church is supposed to do. On top of this, there were the natural antagonism: slave vs. free, men vs. women, rich vs. poor, which were elevated through the lack of understanding and acceptance of the gospel truths pertaining to these relationships. Thus, the Corinthian letter which we have here was not the first letter Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. Apparently, he had written before and been misunderstood concerning church discipline and eating with unbelievers (5:9). The church had written back to him with some questions pertaining to how Christians ought to live, particularly in the light of the city's culture, because there was dispute about what grace means and what holiness means (Can we eat meat sacrificed in one of these temples? Is it better for a man not to marry ever?). Yet, before Paul answers these questions, he has heard from those bearing the letter (16:17,18) and from the household of Chloe (1:11) that there were pressing issues of the day which, in the mind of the apostle, preceded the questions which were asked of him.

Amongst these important issues which Paul discerned was the nature of the relationship between theology and morality. It appeared that in the church of Corinth a movement had grown which wanted to emphasize behavior and to minimize doctrine. Thus, you could say, that the Corinthians wanted to know

how to walk morally, but they were content with merely speculating who Jesus was. It is obvious, both from the Scriptures and from reason, that all of our behaviors are rooted in and grow out of what we believe. Belief always precedes behavior. I believe, thus I do. And if we want to walk uprightly, then we must believe rightly. Orthodoxy (straight doctrine) precedes orthopraxy (right actions). In fact, it will always lead to it. Heterodoxy (“other” doctrine) leads to heteropraxy (“other” actions). Thus, at the root of living well is believing what is True and Real. Thus, Paul’s emphasis on the doctrine of Christ Jesus.

Another of the underlying issues in Corinth was the culture of personality. They had a small group ministry, but the groups had begun to form and define themselves by the personalities which led them, rather than Christ. Thus, some said “I follow Apollos” and others “I follow Paul.” This kind of division based upon loyalty to an individual, rather than to Christ and His express Word, always harms a church.

There was arrogance and haughtiness based upon class and socio-economic status, and it appears that some even refused to eat with others or sit with others or speak to others because they were “below” them socially.

Church discipline was not exercised, because there was laxity about what people believed and thus how people behaved. There was no zeal for the Truth, and thus no zeal for righteousness; little desire to honor Christ, merely to honor men. Personal and individual desires and comforts were prioritized to the functional expulsion of holiness and purity and God-honoring worship. You only need to read a ways into the heart of the letter to see how the church had justified the existence of heinous sin amongst them without any sense of the dangers of living in sin or of the joys of walking in the Spirit of holiness. Jesus had been belittled through this process, thus the Corinthians were seeing much of themselves and little of God. Of course they were unruly and petulant, biting and devouring each other, looking no different than the world because their functional beliefs were no different than the culture around them. They had made the secular their sacred and it led to many theological, relational, and morally chaotic problems. They rejected authority and usurped it for themselves, apparently under a “what is right for you is right for you and what is right for me is right for me” kind of attitude. Thus, they questioned why Paul had any authority to correct them at all.

The Corinthian church was a product of their city’s culture. It devalued true holiness, struggled with sexual immorality, divisive competition, self-centered power-grabbing, yet was supremely gifted in ability and talents and education. Paul spends much of his time revealing the problems underneath the problems, that they had become enamored with their own self-proclaimed wisdom and the spectacular things and had left the ancient path of loving one another through rooting themselves in the Truth, the gospel, which is the doctrine of God. You might say that Paul had learned from the people in Corinth what the danger of such false doctrine regarding holiness was to the church, for he wrote to Timothy,

“If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, <sup>4</sup> he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, <sup>5</sup> and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.” (1 Tim 6:3-5)

As such, Corinth was a fellowship of shallow unity, with a crust that looked spectacular, but underneath was rotten fruit and the dead man’s bones of self-indulgent self-glory and the basic human problem of self-determined autonomy, which is opposed to the absolute authority of Jesus Christ over all things. In this way, it is like most 21<sup>st</sup> century Western churches today.

I chose to preach through this book because I believe that Corinth is a type of our own culture. Divided and competing by the nature of individual self-made authority extends now to the civic sphere, our games are bigger than the world has ever seen (the average NFL team is worth \$1.43 billion, and that is because the average fan is willing to pay for such entertainment), the self-determined and self-assumed man is seen to be ideal (“be true to yourself”), resistance to authority particularly in the inner person (beliefs) is being ostracized from behaviors foolishly (“who is to judge?”), sexual immorality is accepted and even applauded (casual sex is normalized, virginity is shamed, the justification of no-fault divorce, same-gender relationships being called “marriage”, younger people aren’t getting married), we are supremely gifted and wealthy, and yet our conviction of binding Truth is weak and our love for one another often more akin to self-seeking manipulation and power grabbing than self-sacrifice for the flourishing of another in Truth. Our churches are speaking less and less of Jesus Christ the glorious Son of God and speaking more and more of the glory of humanity and the needlessness of holiness and surely of divine absolute rescue. We live in Corinth, so 1 Corinthians will have much to reveal, exhort, admonish, encourage, and bless us with in the coming...years. ☺

While acknowledging the Corinthian movement in the American church, we do not do so without hope. For, God moved toward Corinth with a certain promise to Paul that “there are many of my people in this city.” And Paul calls the church in Corinth, the “church of God.” Not the church of Paul, or even the church of Corinth, but “the church of God which is in Corinth.” You see, God is the one who calls us to Himself. He is the one who calls us to holiness in Jesus. He is the one who equips us by His Spirit to do the works which glorify Him. The church is His in every way, and we belong to Him, even when there is much of Corinth still in us. And what is the church’s response to God’s call in the Lord Jesus? They call upon the name of the Lord Jesus! For salvation, for strength, for guidance, to praise Him, to testify to His greatness, for we recognize that “from Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things. To him be glory forever.”

1 Corinthians is a letter written to the church of God, those who belong to Him, have been sanctified by being united to Christ Jesus by faith, who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus. It is written to a church with powerful gifts but floundering love. It was competitive, self-honoring, sexually immoral, divisive...and the church of God. Look how Paul and Sosthenes begin the letter:

1. Writers:

a. Paul, an apostle

i. What is the significance of apostleship?

1. It means that Jesus has purposes of redemption in Corinth, and He has purposes of redemption in Eugene

a. We tend to respond to licentious culture in one of two ways: 1) Hermit Christianity, pulling back into our Christian ghettos, or 2) Assimilation, adopting and accepting the culture’s norms with vague ideas of reaching it with the gospel, but end up becoming like it

b. The book to the Corinthians shows us that neither of these responses is what our Authoritative Savior-King has sent us to do here.

2. Paul is an ambassador, with all the authority of His Master, who carries forth the mission and the purpose of His master.

a. This mission is not Paul’s. His chains are not his own. He does not struggle for his own name, for his own salvation, for his own safety, or for his own satisfaction. He seeks to fulfill his calling as an apostle, to complete the mission that His master has given him.

b. This is not a letter from merely a far-off friend, or correspondence from our boy on the front lines. Paul writes as an apostle. His words

are God's Words. The Holy Spirit is using Paul to reveal the heart of Jesus Christ to His church.

ii. Called by the will of God

1. How does the will of God impact this apostleship?

a. John 13:16, the sender is greater

i. Paul's relationship with Jesus is not a relationship of equals: Jesus is the Master whom he loves and who loves him

ii. Paul doesn't see a choice in his apostleship: it is a command with hope – the will of God

b. God's will is His resolve, desire, delight, pleasurable purpose which always moves to action for the completion of His goal.

i. If God wills it – it will be – and this is Paul's strength and hope

2. Paul knows, from the very deep recesses of his soul, that His calling to proclaim the Gospel and suffer for Christ is His calling from God. It is God's desire, delight, and resolve to glorify Himself through Paul's preaching and planting His church.

3. This gives Paul a purpose beyond pain, a calling deeper than a mere cause, a hope that pushes him through failure, and a joy that resounds from his darkest prison cell. This is God's desire and delight and God will not fail.

iii. What is the significance of Jesus Christ?

1. THIS IS THE MAIN THING FOR PAUL!!

2. Christianity, what Paul was purposed in building, is not a philosophy...it is not a culture...it is not principles to live by...it is a relationship with a person to be known, loved, honored, trusted, and obeyed: Jesus of Nazareth.

3. The most practical discipline of the Christian life is doing Theology: Asking the question for every turning point in our lives, "Who is Jesus?"

4. Alistair Begg: "The Main Thing of life is to keep the main thing of life the Main Thing of life." The Main Thing of life is Jesus.

a. This is why our study and understanding of the Word of God is so important!! The Scripture is God's very breath, the very expression of His heart. In it we see the glimpse of His Spirit that He desires us to see in order to know Him! It is not a scholarly exercise, a moral endeavor, or a guidebook to make us successful...it is God expressing His very own character to us. It is all about Him; it is all about this person; it is all about knowing Him and His work.

b. At the same time, reading and studying the Scripture, even memorizing it, does not mean that we are in a relationship with Jesus Christ. Many people who do not believe in Jesus study and memorize Scripture. Do not be deceived. These words must lead us into the presence of Christ Himself and speak words of spirit and of fire into our hearts. We know that we know Jesus when His Word changes our lives into conformity to His through the power and working of His Spirit. When our hearts are humble before Him, acknowledging Him as our master and redeemer, and our pride is laid down before His throne. When we submit to His word and worship Him in gratitude...then we KNOW that we are His. Seek His presence, strive to know Jesus Christ, shed the pretenses of self-righteousness and come before Him honestly. Let Him be your purpose, let Him be your hope, let Him be your Redeemer, for everything else in which we place our trust will crumble away one day. It is all about Jesus Christ. Take Him as your Savior and Master today, for He is a loving Master, with a

kind and gentle spirit: He gave His life and bore the fearsome wrath of GOD for us sinners...need I say more.

b. Sosthenes our brother

- i. Sosthenes is the encouragement and evidence of this calling which deeper than a mere cause
- ii. He was beaten by the synagogue's mob, and through this suffering he came to know and love Jesus Christ
  1. Now he is with Paul in Ephesus, writing the believers in the city in which he suffered trauma, and seeking their good and flourishing.
  2. From synagogue leader and all the honor among his people, to rejected and beaten and blamed and abused, to striving side-by-side with Paul for the sake of the glory of Christ Jesus and the flourishing of the Church
- iii. How many Sosthenes' are out there whom God is moving to redeem and include as a brother or sister?
  1. God is moving in Corinth. He is redeeming the lost. He is making enemies new again as beloved brothers.
  2. There is hope in Corinth, despite its flaws and failures and antagonism towards the gospel, for God moves to transform the dead to life through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion:

We live in Corinth, a culture of sexual liberty which trumps Truth; a culture which rejects the idea that there is an Authority which rules over all people in all things; a culture which acknowledges spirituality, but wants it contained within its individual temples and not in the public square; a culture which is competitive because it sets as the ideal man the self-made and self-determined man. And God builds His church in Corinth. He takes people for His own through the preaching of the gospel and the power of His Holy Spirit. He works to purify His people, having set them apart for Himself, He works to make them into the image of His Son in holiness and purity, being zealous for His glory. There is hope for us, O Church of Eugene. There is hope for the lost in this city. There is hope for redemption, for our God chooses the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and all those who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved...in every way.