

Route 66

1 Corinthians: Believers Behaving Badly

Part 46 – December 5, 2010



My message is titled: “Believers Behaving Badly”. In this epistle/letter, Paul takes the Corinthians to task for turning communion into a drunken feast, depriving poor believers of food and wine, and suing each other over trivial matters. They were so confused about grace that they were even *boasting* about an affair between a young man and his mother-in-law.

Last week we looked at “Romans”, the first of 21 New Testament “Epistles” – a fancy way of saying “letters”. And we read this:



... Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.
– Acts 18:1-3 NIV



Let’s take a look at where ancient Corinth was located ... it’s on the southern end of Greece.

We’re looking at the Agora where markets and public meetings were held. And that’s where we get our term, “Agoraphobia”.



On the right is the Lechaion [lekhaion] Road. If we were to stand down there and look back this way, it would look like this.

Paul most likely set up his tent making shop here in the agora where he could witness to the crowds. It was in Corinth that Paul dedicated himself to us gentiles.

But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” – Acts 18:6 NIV

The Jews charged Paul with breaking the law and brought him here, before Junius Gallio, a Roman proconsul (June, 51^{AD} to May, 52^{AD}). And, Gallio stood on this very platform to render his judgment.



... Gallio said to the Jews, “If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law – settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things.” So he had them ejected from the court. – *Acts 18:14b-17 NIV*

It goes on to say that the Jews turned on the synagogue ruler and beat him publically, and that Gallio showed no concern. That mountain is the Acrocorinth, which means, “Upper Corinth”.



Near the top is an acropolis (i.e. fortress). And at the highest summit was the Temple of Aphrodite. As many as 1000 temple prostitutes would come down to the city with “follow me” written on their sandals to entice the men back to the temple.

In ancient Greece prostitutes were nicknamed, *Corinthian girls!*



Corinth was known for luxury, pleasure, and, immorality; similar to how we view Las Vegas. It’s no big surprise that the Corinthian church struggled with worldliness and sexual sin.

And unlike Paul’s usual few days or weeks, he spent a year-and-a-half strengthening the Corinthians.

Paul attracted some very wealthy and influential individuals. He wrote “Romans” while in Corinth and sent them greetings from:

Erastus, who is the city’s director of public works ... – *Romans 16:23b NIV*



Next to a paved street near a theater in the agora, they uncovered a large inscription. It’s written in Latin, and dates to about 50^{AD}. The inscription translates to: “Erastus, in return for his aedileship [EE-dial-ship] (*office of public works*) laid [the pavement] at his own expense. And he’s not the only rich guy:

Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings.
– *Romans 16:23 NIV*



Gaius had to be a fairly wealthy Corinthian, in order to have a house that was large enough to accommodate “the whole church”.

This is the entrance to an upscale home in Pompeii that’s been, thanks to the volcanic ash of Vesuvius, preserved as it was during Paul’s day.

Here's an interior view of another ritzy Pompeii home, just like you'd find in Corinth.



And three years later, while Paul is in Ephesus, some visitors from Corinth show up with a disturbing letter of *current events*.

The wealthy met in the afternoon; but the working class couldn't come till evening. And by the time they arrived, the best rooms were taken, the food was eaten, and the worshippers were drunk!

... your meetings do more harm than good. ... When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. - *1 Corinthians 11:17b; 20-21 NIV*

And it is in this context that Paul writes these famous words:

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. - *1 Corinthians 11:23a-28 NIV*

Besides everything I've *already* mentioned, they were split into factions, fighting about marriage and divorce, spiritual gifts, standards of modesty, and what foods a believer could eat.

I appeal to you, brothers ... that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. ... What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? - *1 Corinthians 1:10-13a NIV*

Paul wants unity; but they're busy splitting theological hairs and destroying their witness as a united body, in the process.

There was a saying the Corinthians apparently loved to repeat: "All things are permissible!" That was their sad interpretation of grace. And it obviously set Paul's teeth on edge:

"Everything is permissible for me" - but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me" - but I will not be mastered by anything. - *1 Corinthians 6:12 NIV*

"Everything is permissible" - but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible" - but not everything is constructive. - *1 Corinthians 10:23 NIV*

So Paul instructs them on modesty, discipline, sexual immorality, marriage, divorce, propriety in worship, and personal liberties. But he warns them:

Be careful ... that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. – 1 Corinthians 8:9 NIV

A. Some believers are weak in knowledge (1 Cor 8:7a)

They might be ignorant of liberties the Lord allows; or maybe the pendulum is swinging back from a self-indulgent lifestyle.

B. Some believers are weak in conscience (1 Cor 8:7b)

They might have a legalistic background, and their conscience is violated by freedoms that don't bother other believers.

C. Some believers are weak in will power (1 Cor 8:10)

They might be struggling to break an addiction, or afraid they might fall back into one.

- The stronger must always sacrifice for the weaker

An older believer once told me he would doubt the faith of *any* Christian who attended an R-rated movie. I didn't argue, *nor* did I invite him to "Braveheart", "The Green Mile", or "The Passion". Now, if you happen to agree with this man's position ... I'm just kidding ... I don't go to those nasty things!

But, what's it mean to be a "stumbling block"? What if that guy sees me going to Braveheart? What if someone with an eating *disorder* sees me buying fries? What if someone with a drinking disorder sees me buying beer? Now, if you happen to think beer drinking is a sin ... I'm just kidding ... I don't drink that nasty stuff!

So, where's the balance between personal freedoms and watching out for the well-being of other believers? Paul is writing to believers who *know* each other's sensitivities and issues well, in fact they've been fighting about 'em!

The stronger believers were *arguing* and *pressuring* the weaker believers to follow their example, without regard to whether or not it would violate the conscience of the weaker seeker.

- Their sin was insensitivity to *known* vulnerability.

Enjoy your freedom; but don't flaunt it in a way that could confuse or compromise a weaker or more inflexible believer.

Paul explains that there are many different gifts, but one Spirit – and many different members, but one body.

... those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. - 1 Corinthians 12:22b-24a NIV

And Paul follows this up with the “love chapter” ...

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. - 1 Corinthians 13:1-7 NIV

Our relationship with the Lord is personal; but it was never meant to be private. Only *together* can we form Christ's body. Every member is called to lovingly minister to the others. If you're a member you're a minister!

Paul ends by taking their eyes off this temporal, broken, mortal world and onto the resurrection of Christ and life everlasting.

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. - 1 Corinthians 15:58 NIV