



A Study of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

The Church in the Mall... An Introduction

When the Mall of America opened in Minneapolis in August 1992, enthusiasts hailed it as one of the seven wonders of the modern world. The largest, fully enclosed retail and entertainment complex in North America, its statistics were mind-boggling. It boasted enough floor space to fill eighty-eight football fields. It hired twice the number of workers employed by the city of Minneapolis. It anticipated 40 million annual visitors-nine times the population of Minnesota-and its first-year budget was twice that of the city of St. Paul. Nicknamed the "**megamall**" by Minnesotans, it drew screams, gasps, and tears from those who saw it for the first time.

But the strongest attraction of the new Mall of America was the "**special services**" that came with its four hundred shops. These included "**Camp Snoopy**," a seven-acre amusement park complete with a roller coaster, an eighteen-hole miniature golf course, numerous customer services, such as cellular phones for separated shoppers, and the ultimate special service, a church service, in the rotunda between Bloomingdale's and Sears. "**A Sunday Mallelujah!**" cried the Minneapolis Star Tribune as six thousand flocked to the opening service organized by Wooddale Church of Eden Prairie.

Many people were enthusiastic. The service was one of the most enterprising and innovative they had ever seen. But others were shocked. A worship service no more has a place in a shopping mall than in a bar or a nightclub. My own view lies with the former, but both reactions missed a deeper point: The problem is not the presence of a church in a mall but the presence of the mall in the church.

The natural association of the megamall and the three-thousand-member megachurch was precisely what the pastors of Wooddale Church had in mind. The symbolism was perfect: Modern megachurches have been built on the philosophical and structural pattern of America's recent shopping malls, which, in turn, have long been described as "**cathedrals of consumption.**" The local press described Wooddale Church as "a kind of megamall of suburban soulsaving. **"Yes,"** said the pastor with a keen appreciation of his win-win relationship with the megamall, **"We're going to bring the mall a lot of business. We've suggested to our people that they wear comfortable clothes in which to do any shopping they have in mind after lunch."**¹

Now, whenever I read something like that it causes me to recoil, almost in horror, because it causes me to realize full well just how deeply the world has pervaded the church today. It seems to me that James Boice was right when he said, **"The church today has employed the world's methods because it has taken up the world's thoughts while pursuing the world's agenda."**²

I think he was right.

But you know the reason that has happened is because worldliness has pervaded our individual hearts and minds. And when I say that I am not just talking about the church at large...I am talking about us...I am talking about me...and the fear that I have that the world may have also pervaded my own mind and impacted the way I reason...the way I look at things.

I think deep down maybe all of us are a bit afraid to look too closely at ourselves for fear that we may indeed find that worldliness has not only pervaded not only our corporate life but our individual thought and worship as well.

That is why, in the next thirteen weeks, I thought it might be a good idea to take a fresh look at Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

You see...First Corinthians has something important to say. It was a letter addressed to a church in trouble...a church that no longer lived in the midst of world but rather lived with the world in its midst. But it is because of that that it is an important book for us to look at. You see...when you get right down to it there are a world of similarities between the church at Corinth and that church over on Riverside...or the one over on I35...or even the one over on Beach St. It is because of that...and it almost causes me pain to say it...that First Corinthians is one of the most practical books in the New Testament.

You see First Corinthians was written to the Church In the Mall...and because it was it has a lot to say to us today.

Corinth was a demographic delight. It was a mixture of all sorts of people.

For over a thousand years the city had been Greek...it was the second most important city after Athens...but the Romans grew tired of its insurgency and completely destroyed the city in 146 BC. It laid waste for just over a hundred years until Julius Caesar decided to rebuild it in 44 BC. When he resettled the site, he did so with Roman freedmen...that is with people who were just one step above slaves. The city regained its prosperity almost overnight.

Now I want you to think about that. It was a Greek city but it was populated principally by Romans...in fact, by Paul's day it was populated with all kinds of

people. It was a Greek city but not really Greek. It was a Roman city but not really Roman. It was whatever a person wanted it to be.

Corinth had a wonderful geographic location. Really and truly...it had the most wonderful location of any church in the ancient world. In modern terms, it was at the junction of two super highways.³

It was a narrow peninsula, separating northern Greece from southern Greece. The peninsula that Corinth was built on was only four and a half miles wide. Two and a half miles to the west from the center of the city was the Ionian Sea and the water passage that led to Rome. Two miles to the east was the Aegean Sea and the water passage that led to Athens and even further to the east to Ephesus and the vast, untapped riches of the Orient.

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Directly to the north was Greece proper and to the northeast was the gulf that led to Thessalonica, Philippi, and Troas. To the south was the cape that led around the southernmost tip of Greece, though it was only two hundred extra miles, it was an extraordinarily difficult sail...especially in winter, somewhat like sailors would later encounter trying to traverse South Africa and the Cape of Good Hope.⁴

So, Corinth enjoyed a wonderful, geographic location.

Sailors, rather than trying to traverse the difficult trip around the cape, would simply dock on one side of Corinth, unload their ships, cart their wares four and

half miles across the narrow peninsula and reload a waiting ship on the other side.

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Eventually, the crossing at Corinth became such a vital link between the east and the west, that the Corinthians paved a road across the entire span of the peninsula, something virtually unheard of in ancient times.

Growing technology eventually allowed them to beach smaller ships on one side of the city, drag them across the four and a half mile expanse and put them in the water on the other side, all without unloading them.⁵ Larger ships had to be unloaded and the freight carried across the narrow gap and reloaded onto ships on the other side.

Such things required an enormous amount of labor...and involved multiple tolls and taxes making Corinth a bustling center for trade and an economic boomtown.

Later, Nero, the Emperor of Rome would make an attempt to cut a canal across the peninsula, but like most things Nero undertook it was a half-hearted effort. He gave it up after only six days work.

The canal was finally cut through the rocky terrain separating Rome from Asia in the late 1890's.

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I would like for you to try to appreciate how important a connection this narrow ribbon of rock became to the ancient world. It could cut a month off the journey from Ephesus to Rome. It was, speaking in a strictly business, beautiful for situation. It was not, however, the joy of the whole earth. But Corinth enjoyed other advantages. It also hosted the magnificent Isthmian Games, second only to the Olympian Games of Athens. They were celebrated every two years and they attracted thousands, even tens of thousands, of spectators. Paul, himself, would use imagery from the games in the letter.

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So, Corinth had a booming, economy and a vital entertainment industry. It was the ancient equivalent of a cross between a dirty, harbor town, and Disney World. It had all the vices that money could buy and it had all the entertainment anyone could want. Listen to the way the ancient historian Strabo (63 BC-21 AD) describes it:

Corinth is called "**wealthy**" because of its commerce, since it is situated on the Isthmus and is master of two harbors, of which the one leads straight to Asia, and the other to Italy; and it makes easy the exchange of merchandise from both countries that are so far distant from each other. And just as in early times the Strait of Sicily was not easy to navigate, so also the high seas, and particularly the sea beyond Maleae, were not, on account of the contrary winds; and hence the proverb, "**But when you double Maleae, forget your home.**" At any rate, it was a welcome alternative, for the merchants both from Italy and from Asia, to avoid the voyage to Maleae and to land their cargoes here. And also the duties on what by land was exported from the Peloponnesus and what was imported to it fell to those who held the keys. And to later times this remained ever so. But to the Corinthians of later times still greater advantages were added, for also the Isthmian Games, which were celebrated there, were wont to draw crowds of people...And the temple of Aphrodite was so rich that it owned more than a thousand temple slaves, courtesans, whom both men and women had dedicated to the goddess. And therefore it was also on account of these women that the city

was crowded with people and grew rich; for instance, the ship captains freely squandered their money, and hence the proverb, "**Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth.**"⁶

Now, I don't want you to get the idea that Corinth was simply a seaport brothel. It certainly provided for the sailors that came through but it was more than that. It was also a very religious city...it provided for religious needs in the same way it provided for physical urges. Listen to Gordon Fee:

Since money attracts people like dead meat attracts flies, Corinth quickly experienced a great influx of people from both West and East, along with all the attendant gains and ills of such growth. The Romans were dominant; they brought with them not only their laws but also their culture and religions. But the Roman world had been thoroughly Hellenized; and since Corinth was historically Greek, it maintained many of those ties-religion, philosophy, the arts. And from the East came the mystery cults of Egypt and Asia and the Jews with their synagogue and "peculiar" belief in a single God.

As often happens in such centers, vice and religion flourished side by side. Old Corinth had gained such a reputation for sexual vice that Aristophanes (ca. 450-385 B.C.) coined the verb *korinthiazō* (to act like a Corinthian, i.e., to commit fornication). Sexual sin there undoubtedly was in abundance; but it would have been of the same kind that one would expect in any seaport where money flowed freely and women and men were available.

The religious expression of Corinth was as diverse as its population. Pausanias describes at least 26 sacred places (not all were temples) devoted to the "gods many" (the Roman-Greek pantheon) and "lords many" (the mystery cults) mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:5. Pausanias does not mention the Jewish synagogue, whose partial lintel with the inscription "synagogue of the Hebrews" has been discovered.⁷

There were in particular three very important temples in Corinth. The most important temple was the Temple to Aphrodite on top the 1,900 foot tall Acrocorinth Mountain that towered over the city.

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It was a temple dedicated to the goddess of love, beauty and sexual rapture.⁸ One historian stated that the temple was serviced by a thousand temple prostitutes, both men and women...and while that number seems likely to have come from the period when Corinth was solely Greek...it does give you a sense of the kind of licentious place Corinth must have been.⁹

The view from the top of the mountain took in views of both the gulf to the west and the gulf to the east. It is one of the most beautiful spots in all of Greece.

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Also important to the city was the Temple of Apollo. Apollo was the legendary twin brother of Artemis or Diana. Apollo was the god of music, intellectual pursuit and religious healing.¹⁰

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Finally, there was the temple dedicated to Asclepius (as-klee'-pee-uhs)...the god of healing. We know his symbol today as the staff with the serpent wrapped around it...it is still used by the American Medical Association.¹¹

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Now the strange thing about the temple of Asclepius is that worshippers at the temple often presented terracotta replicas of their afflicted body parts at the

temple. It is hard to know whether that was part of a request for healing or a votive offering given after having been healed. In the museum near Corinth today there are a number of surviving pieces...some of eyes, some of ears, some of arms and legs...some of private parts.

Some scholars think that that was the image Paul was trying to invoke in 1 Corinthians 12:14ff when he wrote:

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 12:14**...For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, "**Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,**" that would not make it any less a part of the body.

So you can see Corinth was a mixture of a great many things...it was sophisticated and bawdy...it was intellectual and superstitious...it was carnal and religious. All of this evidence together suggests that Paul's Corinth was at same time Cambridge Massachusetts, New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world.

But I prefer us not to think of Corinth in terms of our great, American centers of vice. I want us to think of it, rather, in terms a little closer to home. You see Corinth had a bustling economy. It was a boom-town. In that sense, it had many of the problems attendant with sudden or new wealth. It was very much like our own Metroplex, vile and yet religious, urbane and yet crude, unsophisticated yet proud of it, all the while it was fiercely independent. When I think of all of those descriptions linked together, I am reminded of that famous line from Bartleby the Scrivener from Herman Melville. At the end of the story, he moans the death of Bartleby and all that had happened to him and says, "Ah, Bartleby. Ah, humanity.", and I want to change it to "Ah, Corinth. Ah, Cowtown".

It was into this proud and profane world that Apostle Paul first entered sometime around 51 AD. Luke records the account in Acts 18.

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^{ESV} **Acts 18:1**...After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, ³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. ⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks. ⁵ ¶ When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. ⁶ And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." ⁷ And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. ⁸ Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. ⁹ And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people." ¹¹ And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

The First Epistle to the Corinthians written sometime around 54 or 55 AD was probably Paul's third time of dealing with the Corinthians. He had spent a year and a half there and he had written them at least once. We know he had written them because of his reference to his own letter in 1 Corinthians 5.

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^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 5:9**...I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- ¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the

greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler--not even to eat with such a one.

Now later on, Paul received some first hand reports from the city. He mentions Chloe and Stephanus in particular.

So, what we have in First Corinthians is Paul's third communication with the Church at Corinth. Now I want to be clear about this. He had stayed in Corinth for over a year and a half. After he left, he wrote them a letter...a letter that we do not possess. After writing that letter, he received a letter from the Corinthians asking him a number of questions...mostly regarding behavior but also regarding some theological issues...shortly after receiving their letter he also received reports from Chloe and Stephanus that the Corinthians had largely disregarded his first letter and had decided to follow other, wiser teachers. Now you can see in the text his reference to the various reports he had received.

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ESV 1 Corinthians 1:10...I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers.

Secondly, he had received a letter from Corinth with a number of questions attached to it. Most scholars believe the letter was delivered by the men mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:15-18.

ESV 1 Corinthians 16:15...Now I urge you, brothers--you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints-- ¹⁶ be subject to such as these,

and to every fellow worker and laborer. ¹⁷ I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, ¹⁸ for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such men.

But whether it was delivered by them or not, it is clear that there was a letter and that Paul was, in part, responding to it. The hints of the letter are scattered throughout the text starting in chapter 7.

ESV 1 Corinthians 7:1...Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

ESV 1 Corinthians 8:1...Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up.

ESV 1 Corinthians 11:2...Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. ³ But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head,

ESV 1 Corinthians 12:1...Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.

ESV 1 Corinthians 15:12...Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

ESV 1 Corinthians 16:1...Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.

ESV 1 Corinthians 16:12...Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity.

Now, I want us to play a game for a minute and look at those passages together. I confess that have a taste for mystery novels and if you do you'll probably like this game as well. Even if you don't like such literature, you've probably played

this game before. It may have happened accidentally, I'm sure it would have been accidental, that you heard one half of a telephone conversation. In your mind you were trying to guess what the other person was asking. I want us to do that with these responses of Paul. If we know what his answers were, what were the questions. For example, if you intercepted a note I wrote to my wife and it said,

Honey, I'm so sorry that I forgot. Of course, the day was important to me too. I do care about remembering the most important day of my life. I was distracted with work and everything, but that's no excuse. Please forgive me and accept these flowers as a token of my love.

What would that tell you? I think we can do the same thing with some of the issues that Paul addresses. Let's try. What question was he answering when he wrote:

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 7:1**...Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

Or how about when he wrote?

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 8:1**...Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up.

Or when he wrote?

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 12:4**...Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 14:5**...Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

Or even this one?

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 15:12**...Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead

If we look at the questions that Paul is addressing starting in chapter 7 along with the issues he covers in the first six chapters, we get a pretty good sense of the structure of Paul's argument in First Corinthians. We also will get a pretty good sense of why certain things are there, things like 1 Corinthians 13.

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Now I am highlighting these points because I want you to get a sense of the structure of the epistle. I think it might be helpful to remember that the epistle is structured like this...

Now for next time, I would like to ask you to read 1 Corinthians chapter 1. Now are there any questions. Let's pray.

¹ Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, 1993), 11-12.

² The Cambridge Declaration

³ Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1975), 15.

⁴ Joseph A. Callaway, "Corinth" in *Review and Expositor* 57.04, 382.

⁵ Jerome Murphy-O'Conner, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Michael Glazier Inc., Wilmington, Delaware, 1983), 85-6.

⁶ Strabo, *Geography* (eds. H.C. Hamilton, Esq., W. Falconer, M.A.) 8.6.20.

⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians NICNT*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1987), 2.

Also from Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*

LYSISTRATA: [*pointing to the Corinthian*] And who is this?

LAMPITO: 'Tis an honest woman, by my faith! she comes from Corinth.

CLEONICE: Oh! honest, no doubt then—as honesty goes at Corinth.

⁸ <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/aphrodite.html> In Greek mythology, Aphrodite is the goddess of love, beauty and sexual rapture. According to Hesiod, she was born when [Uranus](#) (the father of the gods) was castrated by his son [Cronus](#). Cronus threw the severed genitals into the ocean which began to churn and foam about them. From the *aphros* ("sea foam") arose Aphrodite, and the sea carried her to either Cyprus or Cythera. Hence she is often referred to as Aphpris and Cytherea. Homer calls her a daughter of [Zeus](#) and Dione.

After her birth, Zeus was afraid that the gods would fight over Aphrodite's hand in marriage so he married her off to the smith god Hephaestus, the steadiest of the gods. He could hardly believe his good luck and used all his skills to make the most lavish jewels for her. He made her a girdle of finely wrought gold and wove magic into the filigree work. That was not very wise of him, for when she wore her magic girdle no one could resist her, and she was all too irresistible already. She loved gaiety and glamour and was not at all pleased at being the wife of sooty, hard-working Hephaestus.

⁹ F.F. Bruce, *First and Second Corinthians* (Butler and Tanner Limited: London, 1971), 18.

¹⁰ <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/apollo.html> The son of [Zeus](#) and [Leto](#), and the twin brother of [Artemis](#). Apollo was the god of music (principally the lyre, and he directed the choir of the [Muses](#)) and also of prophecy, colonization, medicine, archery (but not for war or hunting), poetry, dance, intellectual inquiry and the carer of herds and flocks. He was also a god of light, known as "Phoebus" (radiant or beaming, and he was sometimes identified with [Helios](#) the sun god). He was also the god of plague and was worshiped as [Smintheus](#) (from *sminthos*, rat) and as Parnopius (from *parnops*, grasshopper) and was known as the destroyer of rats and locust, and according to Homer's *Iliad*, Apollo shot arrows of plague into the Greek camp. Apollo being the god of religious healing would give those guilty of murder and other immoral deeds a ritual purification. Sacred to Apollo are the swan (one legend says that Apollo flew on the back of a swan to the land of the Hyperboreans, he would spend the winter months among them), the wolf and the dolphin. His attributes are the bow and arrows, on his head a laurel crown, and the cithara (or lyre) and plectrum. But his most famous attribute is the tripod, the symbol of his prophetic powers.

¹¹ <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/asclepius.html> Asclepius was a Greek hero who later become the Greek god of medicine and healing. The son of [Apollo](#) and [Coronis](#), Asclepius had five daughters, Aceso, [Iaso](#), [Panacea](#), [Aglaea](#) and [Hygieia](#). He was worshipped throughout the Greek world but his most famous sanctuary was located in Epidaurus which is situated in the northeastern Peloponnese. The main attribute of Asclepius is a physician's staff with an Asclepian snake wrapped around it; this is how he was distinguished in the art of healing, and his attribute still survives to this day as the symbol of the modern medical profession.