

Enjoying Sin At Corinth

Paul's letters to the Corinthian church contain wonderful lessons for us as born-again Christians today. This is because there are some similarities between the Corinthian church and some modern-day churchgoers. As you read the following points about the Corinthian Church, trust God to reveal to you if you need to repent of any of the errors or sins into which they fell.

There were various factions at the Corinthian church, as seen in 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 3:3-7, 11:18 and 2 Corinthians 12:20. One faction at Corinth was a liberal group who abused God's grace by blending pagan Greek philosophical ideas with the Bible in ways which supposedly justified sexual immorality and other sins. 1 Corinthians 5:1-12, 6:12-20, 10:1-22, 11:18-21 and 2 Corinthians 12:20-21 relate to this group. Abused grace can be defined as using the great New Testament teaching on God's grace as an excuse for disobedience to any of His New Testament commands or as an excuse for not turning from known sin.

This liberal, grace-abusing group in the Corinthian Church had a number of deep problems which weakened their whole church in different ways.

Liberal Corinthians practiced sexual immorality

This liberal compromising group were involved in various forms of sexual immorality and uncleanness, as 2 Corinthians 12:21 reveals: ***"...and I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced."*** The word ***"lewdness"*** here in the original Greek is "aselgeia" which means "licentiousness, debauchery...especially of sexual excesses"¹ or "excess, absence of restraint, indecency, wantonness...The prominent idea is shameless conduct."²

Note "alsegeia" is also used in Jude 4 about false teachers in the church who use God's grace as an excuse for indulging in sexual immorality: ***"For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ."***

Paul refers to problems with sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 and 6:12-18. In 1 Corinthians 6:12-18, he infers some of this sexual immorality involved visiting prostitutes. 1 Corinthians 6:15-16 states: ***"Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For 'The two,' He says, 'shall become one flesh.'"***

Sex was available readily in Corinth with prostitutes and slaves. Corinth was a major port city so it had multitudes of prostitutes to cater for visiting sailors and businessmen. Some claim up to 1/3 of the population of Corinth were slaves.³ Slaves had no right to refuse sex with their

¹ Bauer, page 114.

² Vine, page 353.

³ Geoffrey Bromiley (Editor), "International Standard Bible Encyclopedia", Volume 4, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988, page 420.

masters and would usually be punished for any refusal. 1 Corinthians 6:9 may infer some of these backslidden Corinthians were compromising with homosexuality also.

In 1 Corinthians 10:1-12, Paul uses the Israelites in Moses' time as an example of people who had been enormously blessed by God but who ruined their relationship with Him and ended up judged with physical death because of such things as sexual immorality, idolatry and so on.

Prostitution was very socially acceptable in Corinth

It is little wonder that in 1 Corinthians 6:12-18, God led Paul to warn Corinthian believers about the damaging spiritual effects of having sex with prostitutes. This is especially since prostitution was very socially acceptable in Corinth.

The ancient writer Athenaeus of Naucratis records the below about the city of Corinth: *"But that the prostitutes also celebrate their own festival of Aphrodite at Corinth is shown by Alexis in 'The Girl in Love': 'The City celebrated a festival of Aphrodite for the prostitutes, but it is a different one from that held separately for freeborn women. On these days it is customary for the prostitutes to revel, and it is quite in the mode for them to get drunk in our company.'"*⁴

Prostitution became so socially acceptable in Corinth in ancient Greece that the city celebrated a festival of the goddess Aphrodite for prostitutes. This is similar to how the state government politicians in New South Wales and the council in Sydney in Australia support the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

Note also what else Athenaeus recorded about Corinth: *"It is an ancient custom in Corinth as Chamaeleon of Heracleia records in his book 'On Pindar', whenever the city prays to Aphrodite in matters of grave importance, to invite as many prostitutes as possible to join in their petitions, and these women add their supplications to the goddess and later are present at the sacrifices. When, accordingly, the Persians invaded Greece, as Theopompus records, likewise Timaeus in the seventh book, the Corinthian prostitutes entered the temple of Aphrodite and prayed for the salvation of the Greeks. Hence also, when the Corinthians dedicated in honour of the goddess the tablet which is preserved even to this day, recording separately the names of the prostitutes who had made supplication on that occasion and were later present at the sacrifices..."*⁵

In his "Corinth", the ancient Greek writer Pausanias (2nd Century A.D.) wrote that in the worship of Aphrodite, the goddess of love at Corinth, only a virgin and a young woman committed to celibacy could go into the sanctuary: *"Beyond this is Aphrodite's sanctuary. Only a young woman who may never go with a man again and a virgin girl consecrated for a year whom they call the Water-bearer can go into it: everyone else must see the goddess from the entrance, and pray from there."*⁶

This is just a sanctimonious sham considering that in his "Geography", the ancient Greek author Strabo (approx. 63 B.C.-24 A.D.) stated: *"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.'"*⁷

⁴ Athenaeus, "Deipnosophistae", Book 13, 574b-c.

⁵ Ibid, Book 13, 573c-e.

⁶ Pausanias, "Corinth", Book 2, 10, 4.

⁷ Strabo, "Geography", 8. 6. 20.

In Sydney, politicians argue that one of the reasons why the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras is supposedly “good” for the city is because of all the money it brings to the city. The people of Corinth argued the same about the prevalence of prostitution in Corinth. The Corinthians did not think of the cost of prostitution in terms of the spread of deadly venereal diseases and the effects on marriages.⁸

Liberal Corinthians were proud of their compromising

This liberal grace-abusing group at the Corinthian Church did not want to see a man who was living in a defacto marriage with his father’s wife, disciplined by the church. They were *puffed up* or *proud* of their so-called “love”, “grace” and “tolerance” towards this unrepentant man. 1 Corinthians 5:1-2 and 6 records: ***“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles – that a man has his father’s wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you... Your glorifying is not good...”***

Maybe this liberal compromising group thought, “Jesus loved and accepted prostitutes and adulterers. So do we.” If this is how they thought, they forgot that while Jesus did love all prostitutes and sexually immoral people, He also commanded they turn from such sins (see John 8:11, Matthew 5:27-30, 19:18 and Luke 18:20).

Also note Paul emphasised in 1 Corinthians 5:11-13 that churches must discipline those claiming to be Christians but who refuse to turn from serious known sin: ***“But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore ‘put away from yourselves that wicked person.’”***

In 1 Corinthians 5:6-7, Paul stressed that if the Corinthian Church did not act soon, they risked destroying their whole church: ***“Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened...”***

Leaven or yeast was mixed with flour and water to create bread. If any leaven which was left over from the last breadmaking, became infected with harmful bacteria and was used to make new bread, it would threaten the health of those eating the new bread. Even though only a small amount of leaven was used, it could have ruined the much larger batch of new dough. Therefore, it had to be removed. By using this example, Paul was showing how dangerous it is for any church to compromise with sin and to avoid church discipline.

⁸ Some writers like Gordon Fee argue that it was likely that Strabo’s reference to 1,000 courtesans or prostitutes was an exaggeration and applied only to Corinth prior to Paul’s time (Gordon Fee, “The First Epistle to the Corinthians”, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987, pages 2-3). Fee’s claims possibly may be correct but it is hard to know without better primary source evidence from ancient times. This is especially since during the reign of Roman Emperor Trajan (52-117 A.D.) when prostitutes were required to register and pay a tax, 32,000 registered in Rome (Dr James Ricci, “The Genealogy of Gynaecology”, The Blakiston Coy, Philadelphia, , page 90). There were probably many others who did not register (Ibid).

Compromising Corinthians getting drunk

Members of this liberal compromising group at the Corinthian Church were also *getting drunk* before or while taking the Lord's supper. 1 Corinthians 11:20-21 states: ***“Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper. For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk.”***

They misunderstood what freedom in Christ means

This liberal group had a false attitude to freedom in Christ. They imagined their freedom in Christ was an excuse for indulging in sexual immorality and other sins. In 1 Corinthians 6:12-18, Paul deals with their wrong ideas and practices in relation to this. 1 Corinthians 6:12-15 states: ***“All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods, but God will destroy both it and them. Now the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God both raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by His power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not!”***

These liberal “freethinking” Corinthians thought freedom in Christ meant they could do whatever they pleased.

In 1 Corinthians 9:1, Paul insisted he was free just as he had in Galatians 5:1. But note Paul's concept of freedom in Christ involved not indulging in fleshly sins but instead serving others in love, as Galatians 5:13 shows: ***“For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”***

Paul understood the person who is *most free* is one who is *most ruled by Jesus Christ*. In 1 Corinthians 9:20-21, Paul emphasised that even though he was not under the Mosaic Law, he was not involved in the sin of lawlessness but was under Christ's Law.

Liberal Corinthians were proud boasters

The members of this liberal group were *full of self-confidence, pride and boasting* about their knowledge, so-called “wisdom”, spirituality and other abilities. See 1 Corinthians 4:6-10, 4:18-19, 5:2, 5:6 and 2 Corinthians 11:18. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 4:18-19 suggest only some of the Corinthians had this problem: ***“Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power.”***

2 Corinthians 11:20 indicates the false apostles troubling the Corinthian Church were proud self-exalters. But 1 Corinthians 4:6-10, 5:2 and 5:6 infer that a large number of the Corinthian Church had similar problems. This is probably why they were so open to be deceived by the false apostles preaching their different gospel and different Jesus. Like attracts like. 2 Corinthians 11:2-4 states: ***“For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have***

not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you may well put up with it.”

This problem of boastful self-confidence seems to have been common to all the Corinthian Church factions except the more godly group. Paul’s linking in 2 Corinthians 12:20 of conceit to the other features of Corinthian Church factional warfare suggests this: *“For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbiting, whisperings, conceits, tumults.”*

Liberal Corinthians integrated false Greek philosophy and the Bible

This compromising liberal group at the Corinthian Church *did not see the danger* in integrating the “wisdom” of *Greek philosophy with the Bible*. Their either immoral or ascetic attitudes to sex and the body were a result of this mix.

Paul warned them of the great danger of the wisdom of the world in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, 2:1-5 and 3:18-20. 1 Corinthians 3:18-20 declares: *“Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their own craftiness”; and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.”*

Proud super-spirituals living immoral lives

In 1 Corinthians 4:6-10, Paul said of some of the Corinthians: *“Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you glory as if you had not received it? You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us – and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you! For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored!”*

In verses 8-10 above, Paul used irony to attack the proud super-spiritual attitudes of those Corinthians who *imagined* they were *living in some type of perfection through Christ*. Their false perfection involved a carefree attitude to sexual immorality, drunkenness and so on as other parts of 1 and 2 Corinthians show.

Their conception of ruling and reigning in Christ, referred to in verse 8 here above as *“You have reigned as kings...”* was to abuse their delegated authority in Christ by using it as a means of being selfish and of justifying their sins.

One key aspect of God's solutions to the Corinthians' problems

In 2 Corinthians 12:20-21, Paul reveals one crucial aspect of God's solution to the problems of the Corinthian Church was *repentance* or changed heart attitudes to their sins. Refer to Chapter "Repentance" for more details about what repentance is.

The Corinthian Church was full of spiritual gifts and manifestations (see 1 Corinthians 1:7, 12:7 and 14:26-33). But they had gotten themselves into a terrible spiritual mess by their attitudes to various sins and their refusal to repent.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13 records Paul strongly warned the Corinthians about the possibility of them ending up like the Israelites in Moses' time who experienced marvellous miracles and manifestations of the Holy Spirit also but who then fell into the sins of idolatry, sexual immorality, tempting God and continually murmuring against Him.

In 1 Corinthians 10:13, Paul emphasised God had given the Corinthian Christians enough power to resist whatever sin which may have tempted them. In 1 Corinthians 10:1-3, Paul stressed the privileges of God's grace given to the Israelites in Moses' time. Paul probably did this in order to emphasise to the Corinthians that they should not use God's grace and their legal standing in Christ as an excuse for treating sin lightly.

The false apostles and Paul compared

There are doubts about whether the false apostles influencing the Corinthian Church were legalists, ascetics or sexually immoral liberals. It is possible these false apostles were from each of these three groups and opposed each other. But whatever the case, Paul records some of the differences between them and him:

- a. They preached a different gospel to him (see 2 Corinthians 11:4).
- b. They preached a different Jesus to him (see 2 Corinthians 11:4).
- c. They were trained in professional speaking but he was not (see 2 Corinthians 11:5-6). (Professional speaking is not sinful as long as we do not have our main focus on it.)
- d. They constantly pressured Christians to give them money, whereas Paul mentioned giving but did not focus on receiving money for his own needs (see 1 Corinthians 9:1-18, 2 Corinthians 2:17, 8:1-9:15, 11:7-9, 11:20-21 and 12:13-14).

In 1 Corinthians 9:1-18, Paul shows even though he had a God-given right to be supported financially in his ministry, he did not always make use of this right. 2 Corinthians 11:7-9 records: *"Did I commit sin in abasing myself that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you free of charge? I robbed other churches, taking wages from them to minister to you. And when I was present with you, and in need, I was a burden to no one, for what was lacking to me the brethren who came from Macedonia supplied. And in everything I kept myself from being burdensome to you, and so I will keep myself."* Acts 18:3 reveals Paul also partly supported himself at times by working as a tentmaker.

- e. The false apostles constantly commended and praised themselves and their ministries, as 2 Corinthians 10:12 shows: *"For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise."* Compare this to Paul's words in

1 Corinthians 3:6-7: ***“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.”***

These false apostles were using the Corinthians Christians to further their own reputation, ministry and influence, whereas Paul was ministering to the Corinthians out of loving concern for their future good (see 2 Corinthians 2:4). 2 Corinthians 11:11-13 records: ***“Why? Because I do not love you? God knows! But what I do, I will also continue to do, that I may cut off the opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the things of which they boast. For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ.”***

Paul boasted only in the Lord about whom he was in Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:30-31 records Paul’s words: ***“But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God – and righteousness and sanctification and redemption – that, as it is written, ‘He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.’”*** 2 Corinthians 10:17-18 is a similar passage.

Paul also boasted about how weak he was without Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 11:30 records Paul’s words: ***“If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity.”*** 2 Corinthians 12:5 and 12:9-10 have similar words by Paul. 2 Corinthians 13:4 records how Paul kept these above wonderful truths in balance: ***“For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you.”***

- f. The false apostles were not overly concerned about the sins into which the Corinthians had fallen. Compare this to Paul’s attitude revealed in 2 Corinthians 11:29: ***“Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?”*** (N.A.S.B.) In his words to the Corinthians, Paul continually emphasised the importance of repentance, abandoning known sin and of holy living (see 1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 6:9-11, 6:12-20, 10:1-22, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1, 7:9-11 and 12:20-21).

May we as modern Christians, rid ourselves of attitudes such as those which the false apostles had. Instead let us imitate the godly Apostle Paul as he imitated Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul wrote: ***“Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.”***

Bible Study Questions

1. What Biblical proof is there that some of the liberal grace-abusing group in the Corinthian Church were involved in various forms of sexual immorality and uncleanness?
2. What attitudes did this liberal group at the Corinthian Church have to the man who was living in a de-facto marriage with his father’s wife?
3. What other sins was this liberal group at the Corinthian Church involved in? Give Biblical proof for your answers.
4. In 2 Corinthians 12:20-21, what did Paul reveal was one crucial aspect of God’s solution to the problems in the Corinthian Church?
5. Compare the differences between the Apostle Paul and the false apostles who deceived the Corinthian Church.