

In a fragile system like Ephesus, this nearly spelled political disaster. Here's how it went:

Nearly every man in the business/working class belonged to a club with other men in his profession. Although these were social clubs, not political parties, Rome sometimes outlawed them because they encouraged sedition. The shipwrights or the weavers often rioted when they felt their interests threatened, for there was no peaceful, legal means of petitioning the government. Now one day a silversmith named Demetrius decided that his business was slumping because people weren't buying as many silver shrines of Artemis as they used to. He blamed the decline on Paul, who claimed the goddess Artemis was no goddess at all. Demetrius got the men of his club stirred up about this, and soon others in related trades joined them.

The issue wasn't just silverworking; it was a matter of civic pride that touched the number one industry: tourism. Of the dozens of gaudy temples in Ephesus, the greatest was dedicated to Artemis. It was the biggest tourist attraction in half the empire: resplendent with 127 marble pillars inlaid with gold; crammed with works by the world's leading artists; mobbed with sightseers, especially during the May fertility festival. Idolatry was big business, and Paul's preaching threatened it.

As happens in an already discontented ghetto, it took almost no time for a riot to erupt. Crowds chanted "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" in the streets, and one of Paul's team members was identified, seized, and carried bodily into the open-air theater. Paul wanted to address the mob, but he had a friend or two among the city's ruling aristocrats, and they begged him not to enter the theater. In the end, one of the top city officials managed to silence the crowd, but only with threats of Roman intervention. This was no idle warning; Rome was known to suppress riots ruthlessly.

Lynching was averted, but Paul knew he had reached the end of his welcome in Ephesus. The end of his job as well. He and his team had launched a fine, healthy community; it could carry on spreading the gospel to neighbors and coworkers, while the mobile team moved on to untouched ground.

## Crisis in Corinth

*Acts 20:1-3, 1 and 2 Corinthians*

### Bad news

If Paul had had nothing else to do in Ephesus but make a living and nurture former occultists in the ways of Jesus, he would have had his hands full. But he was also keeping tabs on affairs in the other cities he'd worked in. Most of his seedlings were apparently flourishing, despite hostile soil. But the Corinthian group became a nuisance during his last year in Ephesus.

First came news that a member of the community had a sexual alliance with his father's wife (presumably not his mother). Paul wrote to Corinth with instructions not to associate with someone like that; blatant incest of a kind that shocked even pagans brought disgrace on the people of God.

Sometime later a believer named Chloe visited Paul in Ephesus and brought more discouraging news. The Corinthian group was splitting into factions, each of which claimed some prominent Christian leader as its authority. Several of the factions expressed contempt for Paul and his messages telling them what to do. Then three Corinthians brought Paul a letter from the whole community. This letter was full of questions about various issues, but the messengers also reported that the incest was continuing,

and class snobbery and other cancers were infecting the church. In response to these ills, Paul dictated a second and very long letter—the one we call 1 Corinthians.

Corinth may have had a reputation for loose morals, but it was also known for money and intellectual pride. It was rich in commerce and prostitution, and its upper classes tended to have pretensions of philosophy. Predictably, wealth, loose morals, and intellectual pride lay at the root of the troubles in the Corinthian church.

### Wisdom and Foolishness

Paul tackled the pride first. The anti-Paul factions apparently regarded him as an inferior apostle compared to Peter and Apollos. That both of these men were honorable apostles Paul agreed,<sup>1</sup> but the Corinthians entirely misunderstood what that job implied. To them, an apostle held the community's highest rank, with the people deciding who was and who wasn't one. The criteria included an air of authority, talent at public speaking, philosophical sophistication, and an impressive appearance. Paul's sin was that he lacked stage presence.

He scoffed at this attitude. First of all, God turned up His nose at sophistication; He had always deliberately chosen the weak and foolish to fulfill His plan so that nobody would try to take credit. Anybody who thought his brains or talents were earning a place in God's front office needed to go back to sweeping floors.

Second, Paul deliberately avoided using a slick presentation to attract converts. He wanted people to commit themselves because they witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit in their midst and fell in love with the crucified Christ, not because Paul's performance wowed them.

It wasn't that God's truth was so simple that any fool could understand it. It was that the kind of wisdom necessary to understand it was not intellectual. IQ made no difference. God's truth required the wisdom of humility. Apostleship wasn't some grand rank that one could lord over everybody else. It meant one had to excel at unselfish service, refuse to compare himself to others, take no interest in a pecking order, and accept

weakness, dishonor, hunger, homelessness, and slander. In God's upside-down system, the ranking office was to be "scum of the earth" (1 Corinthians 4:13). When the Corinthians understood that, they would be ready to be taught some of God's "sophisticated" truths.

### Discipline

Next, Paul explained his views on handling immorality. These people who were so proud of their religious knowledge were still unmoved by a case of open incest. Paul repeated that they should expel the offender from their group until he stopped his offense. This wasn't a matter of a besetting sin that someone was struggling against and occasionally giving in to. It was a coolly chosen lifestyle. The community needed to withdraw its spiritual protection so that Satan could have free access to inflict the natural consequences of flagrant evil. The Corinthians would actually be doing the man a favor, since suffering might be the only thing that would bring him to his senses.

Furthermore, excising the cancer would keep it from infecting others in the group. Paul clarified what he'd said about avoiding the immoral. He didn't mean avoiding immoral pagans; all pagans were immoral, and God's people were called to reach out to them. Rather, he meant avoiding believers (or those who claimed to believe) who practiced gross sin without a blush.

The community needed to be serious about exercising discipline. Paul was shocked that people had to take fellow believers to court to get justice because the community wouldn't even discipline swindlers. Paul wasn't encouraging a cult attitude where the group should correct every deviation from its norms. Almost always, God was the trainer and judge, not people. But in glaring cases like adultery, idolatry, theft, and slander, the community needed to step in.

### Sex and Marriage

The fact is, Corinthian society made it hard to have healthy views on sex. Visiting prostitutes was standard recreation. Nobody thought twice about it. So Paul had to explain why God forbade something as apparently harmless and fun as extramarital sex.

Free sex isn't harmless, he said. Intercourse isn't just a physical act; it actually forges a powerful link between the partners. But a believer's body and spirit are united with Christ. The Holy Spirit permeates not just his spirit, but also his body. So to take that which belongs to God and join it to a prostitute makes real intimacy with Christ impossible. Physical acts have spiritual consequences. Paul's bottom line: "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

However, side by side with those who regarded sex as morally neutral were some in Corinth who considered it base. Greeks considered spirit good and matter evil. Thus, according to them, the human spirit was divine but the body was corrupt. Some people concluded that spiritual persons could therefore do anything they liked with their bodies (the free-sex faction), while others concluded that spiritual persons should deny their bodies' desires, especially those for food and sex. These same two pagan points of view were apparently rife in the Corinthian community. Some people were evidently saying that believers should avoid not only sex outside marriage but also sex inside marriage, and even marriage itself. Since Paul was himself unmarried and celibate, they pointed to him as an example of the truly spiritual man. In reply, Paul explained why he recommended his own lifestyle to those who could handle it, but unhesitatingly advised marriage to everyone else.

Some people, said Paul, have a gift for being celibate. That's great because it frees us to devote our full attention to serving Christ. Most people, though, don't have that gift. If they try to pretend they do out of some spiritual pride, they'll just end up thinking about sex all the time, probably start sleeping around, and won't be effective for God at all. They should get married.

If you're already married, Paul went on, don't even think about celibacy. Your body belongs to your spouse almost as it does to Christ. About divorcing an unbelieving spouse, Paul's personal opinion was against it because in some way a believer's devotion to God has a positive spiritual effect on his or her spouse and children. It was okay to grant a divorce to an unbelieving spouse who wanted it—Christ shouldn't become

the cause of domestic strife—but it wasn't okay to initiate the divorce. As for divorcing a believer and remarrying, Paul considered this unthinkable because of explicit statements of Jesus, such as Matthew 5:31-32. He was remarkably nonnegotiable on the subject, for he took marriage extremely seriously.

### Rights and Responsibilities

Paul gave these judgments on sex and marriage in response to questions brought by his three visitors. Another question had to do with eating meat sacrificed to idols. Was it okay or not? The issue was important because it was hard to avoid such meat in Corinth. For one thing, nearly all dinner parties, trade association meetings, and other social occasions included some dedication to the patron deity of the gathering. Many parties and meetings were actually held in temples.

Furthermore, nearly all butchers (except Jewish ones) sold sacrificed meat; many were even attached to temples. When an animal was offered in a temple, a small portion was burnt for the god, the worshipers got some (they usually ate it right there in a dinner party), and the priests got the rest. What the priests couldn't use they sold to the butchers. Since only the best animals could be offered to the gods, the best meat was more than likely from a sacrifice.

So, in order to avoid idol meat, one would have to shop only at Jewish butchers (or Christian ones if there were any) and never attend any social occasions with pagans. For anyone whose livelihood depended in part on business dinners or trade association meetings, this was out of the question. For anyone who cared about social standing, it was absurd.

Some of the Corinthian Christians reasoned that since the idols were not real gods there was no reason to sabotage their businesses, their social standing, and their diets. These enlightened ones may have been the more wealthy and educated who were used to eating meat daily in ordinary, nonreligious situations. Knowledge was one of their great values—for instance, the knowledge that idols were nothing.

However, others found it difficult to shake the idea that the idols they had been worshiping all their lives were real, powerful

entities who somehow contaminated the meat offered to them. Among this group were probably the poorer members of the community whose daily diet was vegetarian and who normally saw meat only in temple feasts. For them, the association between meat and idolatry was strong. This group couldn't help feeling that by eating meat offered to idols they were defiling themselves, and by attending parties in temples they were countenancing the worship there.

There was one other factor in this debate. In the Jerusalem decree, the apostles had all agreed that Gentiles need not be circumcised but must avoid sexual immorality and food sacrificed to idols. Paul did not mention this decree (to which he had agreed only a few years earlier) in his letter to Corinth, but some Corinthians may have been trying to enforce it.

It took Paul several pages to outline the principles behind eating or not eating idol meat. He wanted to leave his readers not just with a yes-or-no rule, but with standards they could apply widely.

First, love is more important than knowledge. Yes, idols are nothing and Paul usually wouldn't hesitate to eat idol meat. But if somebody doesn't know what we know, we shouldn't just sneer at that person. If he's a weak believer, one who is tempted to violate his conscience and imitate us, we should *voluntarily limit our freedom* out of love for him. (On the other hand, if he's a Pharisee who is tempted not to imitate, but to complain and judge, we should *refuse to give in* to his pressure.) Encouraging someone to violate his or her conscience is harmful.

Second, serving God is more important than exercising rights. As an apostle, Paul had the right to financial support from the people he converted and trained. But he voluntarily declined that right and worked to support himself so that money matters wouldn't keep people from coming to Christ. Paul was always ready to forgo his own preferences to draw someone to Jesus. He practiced Jewish culture among the Jews and Greek culture among the Greeks. He ate meat with the meat-eaters and vegetables with the vegetarians. Moral standards he would not sacrifice, but with social customs he was flexible.

Third, purity is more important than comfort, and self-

deception is easy. In the midst of liberty, Paul exercised self-discipline so that he wouldn't be overtaken by addictions. In the unbridled pursuit of freedom, addiction becomes bondage. Paul lived constantly like an athlete in training, keeping his body and spirit in shape for serving God. He pointed to Israel's history as proof that sharing in idol feasts led easily to idolatry, loose sex, and coldness toward God. Those strong Corinthians who were so sure they could attend dinner parties at temples and not be tempted to share in the worship, drunkenness, and sex that accompanied them should think again. Were these knowledgeable ones really as strong as they thought? For if they crossed the line and dabbled in paganism, they had better be clear on the implications: they were worshipping demons.

### Corporate Worship

Next, Paul addressed some questions about corporate worship. He scolded some women who were asserting their freedom in Christ by deliberately offending against the social customs of the day. Those women needed to show respect for their husbands and everybody else by covering their heads when the community gathered for worship, as was considered proper from one end of the empire to the other. There was no good reason for deliberately looking like a prostitute.

Paul also rebuked the rich members of the community for making a mockery of the Lord's Supper. At that time, believers commemorated Jesus' last meal with His disciples by eating a full meal together, the "love feast" (Jude 12). The meal was supposed to be like a potluck dinner, with each member bringing something to share. But in Corinth, the rich were arriving early with the fine meats and wines they were used to, and going ahead without the rest. The slaves and artisans arrived later when they had gotten off work. They had to make due with the scanty food they were able to bring.

When pagan aristocrats gave feasts, they usually invited their entire households. The slaves and servants received smaller portions and cheaper wine than the higher class guests. Evidently, the rich members of the church considered this appropriate in the love feast as well. Paul considered it sacrilege.

The love feast was a holy celebration, a foretaste of the Kingdom wedding banquet, a profound sharing in the very blood and body Jesus offered for humankind. It resembled sitting down to dinner with God Himself; and like the meal Israel's elders shared to seal the Old Covenant, this meal bound those who ate it in union with each other and Christ. To treat it lightly was to spit in God's face, and Paul honestly attributed some of the illnesses and deaths among the Corinthians to this travesty.

### Spiritual Gifts

Another knotty problem had to do with the way people treated abilities they received from the Holy Spirit. People with certain spectacular gifts were claiming higher status than those who lacked them. Those who had only "ordinary" abilities felt inferior. Paul came up with an analogy to explain what God was really doing.

The community of believers, he said, is like a human body. Each person is a limb or organ of the body. No organ is unnecessary, even those that seem to have less glorious functions (like livers cleaning impurities from the blood). God's Spirit works through each member to fulfill the function he or she is designed for.

When the Spirit enables someone to do something useful for the body, such as heal or prophesy, it is not so that the person can be exalted. It is so that a necessary job can get done. Bringing the presence of Christ to a dark world requires some supernatural activities. Each believer should do the activities he is equipped for without comparing himself to the rest. In the final analysis, everybody needs everybody else if the whole job is going to get done.

The Corinthians thought the ability to speak or pray in an unknown language was superior because it seemed so dramatic and obviously supernatural. Paul's criterion was different. A gift to long for was something like prophecy, the ability to speak words from God that strengthen the body. It was great to speak in unknown languages if it built you up in Christ (although you shouldn't disrupt community gatherings with it), but it was far better to build the whole group up. Love, not flashiness, was the

standard by which to measure everything.

The Corinthians were so eager to show off their abilities in order to win status that worship gatherings were degenerating into bedlam. Paul urged the people to offer their gifts in turns, focusing on what would do the most good for the group.

### Resurrection

The last big issue Paul addressed in this long letter was resurrection. Paul taught that when Christ returned, His people would be raised from death to live with Him forever. Some in Corinth were apparently denying that physical resurrection was possible or even desirable. After all, if bodies are nasty and corrupt, as most Greeks believed, wouldn't it be much more spiritual to be a disembodied immortal soul? And how could a body that gets sick and old be suitable for eternal life?

First of all, said Paul, if there's no resurrection, then Jesus wasn't resurrected either and we might as well be pagans. Physical resurrection is a cornerstone of the gospel.

Second, there's no need to dismiss resurrection because of crude ideas of what it would be like. It's not a matter of coming back to life in the body you had when you died — old or crippled. Like a seed that is buried in one physical form and sprouts into a startlingly different one, so we die in one form and will be raised in another: imperishable, glorious, a "spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:44).

Paul understood that death was the great terror behind every human fear. He wanted the Corinthians to understand that for them, death held no threat. So he wrote,

When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

"Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55)

He who clung to the resurrected Christ could face anything.

### Closing

Paul closed with some personal business. Years earlier, he had promised the apostles in Jerusalem that he would “continue to remember the poor” (Galatians 2:10). He had brought a contribution from the Gentile churches to the Jerusalem church during a famine, and the apostles wanted him to continue to do this. Jerusalem was a poor city; the Jews there were supported partly by contributions from Jews living abroad, but the followers of Jesus had no access to those funds. They needed help from their spiritual offspring, and Paul was glad to aid them.

Recently, Paul had decided to take up a collection among his communities in order to acknowledge the debt the Gentiles owed the mother community in Jerusalem, to show that these Gentiles were genuine believers, and to knit the Jewish and Gentile groups together. He planned to visit Corinth on his way from Ephesus to Macedonia, so he asked the Corinthians to have their contribution ready when he arrived. There was no set fee; it was between them and God what they wanted to give.

### Ambassadors of Reconciliation

Paul dispatched this lengthy message and asked Timothy to drop in at Corinth on his way back from Macedonia to see how his letter was received. Timothy was rudely rebuffed, and when Paul himself visited Corinth briefly, the defiant factions humiliated him. Paul wrote a severe letter “out of great distress and anguish of heart” (2 Corinthians 2:4) and sent it with Titus, another of his young associates. This anguished letter is now lost.

Paul left Ephesus with the issue still unresolved, so, contrary to his former plan, he went to Macedonia to gather the contribution for Jerusalem while Corinth hopefully cooled down. There Titus met him with good news: the Corinthians had repented of their rebellion. Paul quickly sent Titus back with a fourth letter full of affection as well as a stern warning—the letter we call 2 Corinthians.

Not that there wasn’t still tension. Paul’s adversaries were still saying that by changing his itinerary, Paul proved that he couldn’t be trusted. And they still hinted that he wasn’t a genuine apostle and was probably pocketing the money he was supposedly

gathering for the people in Jerusalem.

In response, Paul defended at length his trustworthiness and genuineness. But his defense was much less self-centered than Christ-centered. He exalted “the God of all comfort” who rescued his team from life-threatening pressures in Ephesus, the God who had commissioned and equipped Paul for his job and who continued to set the agenda and take care of Paul’s needs. He wrote, “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God” (2 Corinthians 3:5). Paul saw himself as a common clay pot holding a priceless treasure: the message of Christ, who transforms those who behold Him into glorious beings like Himself.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to taste his passion for Jesus and his mission. “Christ’s love compels us,” he wrote (2 Corinthians 5:14). If Jesus truly did die for humankind and was really raised from death, then there is no longer any need for people to devote their lives to self-seeking ends. On the contrary, it makes no sense to do anything other than serve Christ in relieved gratitude. All of the reasons for self-focus—fear of death, of failure, of rejection; craving for love, for security, for mattering in the universe—all have been rendered pointless by the Cross.

The hope of resurrection transfixed Paul and made him capable of anything:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

Paul laid before the Corinthians all the things he had gladly endured for Christ: “beatings, imprisonments and riots . . . hard work, sleepless nights and hunger” (6:5). And he summarized his mission—indeed, the mission God had been on since Adam—in one word: reconciliation. “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has

committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (5:19-20).

The "we" he referred to were first of all the members of his apostolic team, and secondarily the members of local bases like Corinth. Reconciliation was a spiritual war. The Snake had blinded the minds of unbelievers (4:4). So how do you combat an Enemy who fights by blinding minds? What are the true marks of an apostle? An impressive appearance? Tough talking?

No. The world wages war with physical might and intimidation, or with glitz and image. We, said Paul, wage it with a spiritual power to demolish fortresses of the mind. We fight with prayer, truth, integrity. We capture thoughts and turn them to Christ. For we are out to defeat not people, but the Enemy who rules their hearts and minds.

It's a subtle war that has never made its generals look impressive. Moses, Samuel, Elijah, Isaiah—all were great men of the Spirit who continually faced abuse because they refused to play the image game.

Was Paul's apostleship in doubt? He pointed to three credentials: first, the scores of people he had brought to Christ and established in communities such as Corinth; second, the miraculous signs that had first confirmed Peter's apostleship; and third, a litany of suffering for Christ. Paul boasted about his sufferings rather than his successes because he knew that everything he had accomplished was by the power of God. He delighted in his weakness because he had learned that when he was weak, much more than when he was confident in his strength, Christ could work powerfully through him.

To stir the Corinthians to jealousy, Paul also boasted of how generously the poor Macedonian communities were contributing to the Jerusalem fund. Paul didn't want to manipulate the Corinthians, but he knew that many of them were far wealthier than those in Philippi and Thessalonica, and he wanted them to learn the joy of giving without calculating a return. Giving had rewards the Corinthians had never imagined. It was an area of Christlikeness they had not tasted. And if there was any doubt about Paul's integrity, he assured his readers that representatives

from each contributing community would accompany him and the gift to Jerusalem.

### Paul in Corinth

Titus and two other well-respected believers carried this letter to Corinth, so that when Paul and the delegation to Jerusalem arrived, the Corinthians would be ready to receive them. Paul didn't want the Corinthians to look unprepared, selfish, or in disarray in front of brothers they had never met. Titus's mission was apparently successful, for Paul's group stayed three months in Corinth until some Jews plotted to kill him and forced him to leave.

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#### NOTE

1. There seem to have been more people recognized as apostles than just Paul and the Twelve. Paul includes Apollos with him and Peter in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4:13, where he calls them "us apostles" (4:9). Barnabas, Epaphroditus, Silas, and Timothy also receive the title (Acts 14:1-4; Philippians 2:25—translated "messenger" in NIV; 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2:6-7). Then there were men Paul called "super-apostles" or "false apostles" (2 Corinthians 11:5,13), men whom the Corinthians considered apostles but who were not sent from God.

The term may have had a fluid meaning; the Twelve certainly held an authority in the international community that Epaphroditus or Timothy did not.