

# “A Setup for Misinformation”

1 Corinthians 12:1-7 <sup>1</sup>

The small church was wracked by divisions and discord. Powerful leaders promoted themselves against each other, each with their band of loyal followers. One of the leaders was actually having an affair with his stepmother, and, instead of disciplining him, many in the church boasted of his freedom in Christ to behave in such a way. Occasionally, members of the church took each other to court; some were known to visit prostitutes.

As a backlash against such immorality, another faction in the church lobbied for strict celibacy as the Christian ideal. Disagreements raged about whether Christians really needed to live differently from the world outside the church, and strong opposing opinions about women’s roles in the church added to the confusion.<sup>2</sup> Does this sound like a church where you’d want to worship?

While these characteristics might sadly describe more than one congregation, the particular church I have in mind was located in the city of Corinth about 50 A.D. I invite you to travel back in time to consider their situation . . . .

A glance at *Google Earth* shows that Corinth was made for greatness. As you probably know, the southern part of Greece—the Peloponnesus—is very nearly an island. On the west, the Gulf of Corinth nearly slices Greece in two, and on the east, the Saronic Gulf moves in to nearly meet it. All that connects the north and the south of Greece is a narrow isthmus only four miles across, and on that narrow spit of land sits the city of Corinth.

Such a location made it inevitable that Corinth would become one of the greatest commercial centers of the ancient world. Any land traffic moving from north to south or south to north had to go through Corinth, and most of the east-west sea traffic in that part of the Mediterranean passed through Corinth as well.

The extreme southern tip of Greece was known as Cape Malea, or, as it is now called, Cape Matapan. It was a dangerous Cape, and to transit Cape Malea represented in those days much the same dread and danger as Cape Horn represents even today. The Greeks had two sayings about the voyage around Malea: “Let him who sails round Malea forget his home,” and “Let him who sails round Malea first make his will.”<sup>3</sup>

Happily, the city of Corinth was ideally situated to allow sailing ships to avoid Cape Malea. Cenchrea, about six miles to the east on the Saronic Gulf, led straight to Asia, and Lechaeum, about two miles to the north on the Corinthian Gulf, led straight to Italy. A four-mile rock-paved track, the *Diolkos* (built c. 625-585 B.C.), connected the two ports, enabling cargo and even small ships to be hauled across the Isthmus from one Gulf to the other, allowing vessels to avoid the treacherous passage around Cape Melea.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 13, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Blomberg, “1 Corinthians,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, “Letters to the Corinthians,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> David E. Garland, “1 Corinthians,” *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), p. 1. The Roman Emperor Nero started building a canal between the Saronic Gulf and the Gulf of Corinth in A.D. 67, not many years after Paul was there, but the canal was not actually finished until 1893. The canal is so narrow that merchant ships no longer use it today.

Being so situated as to control passage and to impose tariffs in virtually every direction, ancient Corinth prospered exceedingly and was a wealthy and powerful city. Beyond this trade, Corinth was the host city for the biennial Isthmian Games, which were second in importance only to the quadrennial Olympics. This meant that the city had significant tourist income as well as mercantile income.

Another important geographical feature of Corinth was that it was situated at the foot of a steep mountain known as the Acrocorinth, which rose 1,000 feet above the city. The Acrocorinth provided protection for the city on one side, while the six miles of walls protected it the rest of the way.<sup>5</sup> In addition to this natural and man-made protection, the city contained an inexhaustible water supply in the fountain of Peirene.<sup>6</sup>

Although many pagan gods were worshiped in Corinth, the most famous—and most popular—was Aphrodite, whose temple was located at the top of Acrocorinth. Centuries before Paul, there had been as many as 1,000 cultic prostitutes who served patrons on the mountain, which also boosted the local economy. Indeed, in those ancient days, Corinth was well-known as an exceedingly wicked city, and “to Corinthianize” meant to indulge in the worst debauchery imaginable.

Ancient Corinth eventually became “too big for its britches,” and it led the Achaean League into revolt against Rome, for which Rome utterly destroyed the city in 146 B.C. The city lay desolate for more than a century before its reconstruction as a Roman, not a Greek, city, and it was this city to which Paul came in New Testament times. Although New Testament Corinth made no real effort to “clean up its act” from its ancient wickedness, in Paul’s time Corinth was likely neither much better nor much worse than any other great seaport of that era.<sup>7</sup>

Roman Corinth had a metropolitan area of more than 100,000 people, and was once again the wealthiest city in Greece. It had a concert hall that would seat 3,000 and an outdoor theater that would seat 18,000.<sup>8</sup> As a fairly new city without an entrenched aristocracy, Corinth provided real opportunity for upward social mobility, and this favorable economic climate attracted settlers from all over the Empire who hoped to work their way up the social ladder.<sup>9</sup>

When Paul came to Corinth, the city teemed with commerce as the vital link between Rome and its eastern provinces, attracting traders from everywhere in the Empire. Even beyond Greece, Corinth was one of the great cities of the Empire, and its inhabitants were so affluent that wealth and ostentatious display became its hallmark. Roman Corinth seems to have been a city tailor-made for those who were preoccupied with the marks of social status.

To use terms from our own day, “schmoozing,” “massaging egos,” “rubbing shoulders with the powerful,” “pulling strings,” “scratching each other’s backs,” and “dragging rivals’ names through the mud” all describe what was required to attain success in Roman Corinth. Then, as now, money cleared a path for social climbing because it enabled one to buy friends and clients through extravagant spending.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond B. Brown, “1 Corinthians,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), p. 287.

<sup>6</sup> F. F. Bruce, “1 and 2 Corinthians,” *The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> C. K. Barrett, “The First Epistle to the Corinthians,” *Harper’s New Testament Commentaries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Blomberg, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Garland, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Garland, pp. 4-5.

Paul lived and worked in Corinth for a year and a half, and there were at least three reasons why being in Corinth suited his missionary strategy: (1) as a major destination for traders, travelers, and tourists, Corinth was an ideal location from which the Gospel could spread; (2) the nature of the city's commerce provided Paul with ample opportunity to ply his trade of tent making and leather working, since there was need for tents for sheltering spectators at the games, awnings for retailers at the forum, and sails for the merchant ships; (3) the tumultuous and fluid social situation, with the city populated mostly by relative newcomers, created an environment well-suited for persons to reconsider their faith connections.<sup>11</sup>

The evidence is that Paul arrived in Corinth in the spring of A.D. 50 and stayed there until the fall of A.D. 51, still less than twenty years after Jesus' Resurrection.<sup>12</sup> As was his practice, Paul began preaching about Jesus in the synagogue, and, when his testimony was rejected in that setting, he found a ready welcome among the Gentile citizens of Corinth (Acts 18:1-7). After getting Corinth's Christian community well launched, Paul crossed the Aegean Sea to Ephesus, where he worked for another three years.

Paul hadn't been in Ephesus very long before he wrote a letter back to the church in Corinth, encouraging them to keep themselves separate from "immoral people." This letter, which we do not have, was misunderstood, leading to their sending a letter to Paul asking for clarification. The bearers of the letter brought word that not all was well with the fellowship, which caused Paul to write the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. In this letter he dealt first with the divisions that were occurring in the fellowship as the ladder-climbing and back-stabbing of the larger culture were being replicated in the church, and then he responded to the various matters about which they asked.

Later, receiving word that the fellowship continued to deteriorate, Paul made a return visit to Corinth, the confrontation of which was very painful both for him and for the congregation. Not long after that visit, Paul wrote a third letter, this one quite severe, which apparently shocked the congregation sufficiently to get things back on track. Most of what we know as 2 Corinthians is Paul's glad response to the news that the fellowship was healing and growing again. Eventually, Paul returned to Corinth a third time, this time for a congenial and reconciling visit, and it was from Corinth that he wrote the letter to Rome.

Now as I'm sure you know, nearly 80% of the New Testament is in the form of letters, such as Paul's letters to Corinth and Rome. We have thirteen letters by Paul, three letters by John, two letters by Peter, one each from James and Jude, and one by the unknown author of Hebrews. With few exceptions, these letters are personal communication between friends rather than carefully constructed theological treatises, and it is because we have so many of his letters that we tend to feel that we know Paul so well as we do.

While the authorship of some of the New Testament letters has been debated, the testimony of the church with respect to 1 Corinthians is older, clearer, and more widespread than for any other book of the New Testament.<sup>13</sup> For the next six weeks, we're going to focus on the most familiar chapter in 1 Corinthians—chapter 13, "the love chapter"—but in order to understand that chapter, we need to see it in the context of the letter as a whole and of Paul's relationship with the Corinthian church over time.

One of the unique contributions of 1 Corinthians is that in this letter we see Paul applying the principles of Christian faith to common issues of everyday life, and it is here that he

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<sup>11</sup> Garland, pp. 17-18.

<sup>12</sup> Barrett, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Barrett, pp. 11-12.

emphasizes the primacy of Christian love more than in any other of his letters.<sup>14</sup> Although our study from here on will be limited to chapter 13, there are so many important things in 1 Corinthians that I really must mention a few of them to help set the context for our study.

1. Paul begins 1 Corinthians emphasizing the centrality of the Cross, and he ends the letter emphasizing the significance of the Resurrection:
  - a. **The Cross:** *<sup>18</sup> For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>21</sup> For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:18, 21-24).*
  - b. **The Resurrection:** *<sup>14</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. <sup>17</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup> Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. <sup>19</sup> If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. <sup>20</sup> But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. <sup>21</sup> For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. <sup>22</sup> For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17-22).*
2. Paul emphasizes that it is only through **the Spirit of God** that we discern God's truth: *<sup>14</sup> The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14).*
3. Paul focuses over and over in this letter on our **mutual responsibility** toward one another: *<sup>9</sup> Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>13</sup> Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall (1 Corinthians 8:9, 13).*
4. It is in this letter that Paul gives us one of the most powerful of God's promises regarding **resisting temptation**: *<sup>13</sup> No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13).*
5. It is here that we have the earliest record of what we call "The Words of Institution" for **the Lord's Supper**: *<sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, <sup>24</sup> 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." <sup>25</sup> 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." <sup>26</sup> For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).*

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<sup>14</sup> Brown, pp. 294-295.

6. 1 Corinthians contains some of Paul's most important teachings about **spiritual gifts**:

*<sup>1</sup> Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. <sup>2</sup> You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. <sup>3</sup> Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.*

*<sup>4</sup> There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. <sup>5</sup> There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. <sup>6</sup> There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. <sup>7</sup> Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:1-7).*

7. It is in 1 Corinthians that Paul gives us one of the most important and early testimonies of **personal experience of the Resurrection**: *<sup>3</sup> For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ **died** for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was **buried**, that he was **raised** on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he **appeared** to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. <sup>6</sup> After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, <sup>8</sup> and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).*
8. And it is in 1 Corinthians, in the context of all the discord and controversy in that troubled congregation, that Paul wrote, "*I will show you the most excellent way*" (1 Corinthians 12:31), after which he penned what we know as "**the Love Chapter.**"

For the next six weeks, we're going to consider the implications of this "*most excellent way*"; and, because the only way we're going to understand these things is to discern them through the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2:14), we close with a prayer that God will grant us a fresh filling of the Spirit so that we may discern deeply:

Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me.  
 Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me.  
 Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.  
 Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on me.<sup>15</sup>

The Corinthian church was filled with misinformation because they trusted in their own abilities, their own inclinations and their own cleverness rather than on God's Spirit. May it not be so for us!

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Iverson, "Spirit of the Living God," Birdwing Music, 1994.