–Save This Page as a PDF–

Social Relations in Corinth

This letter should be read against the background of **Corinth** as **a city** saturated with Roman cultural values. It was a miniature version of Rome itself, and it fostered the majesty of Roman culture, religion, and values. The official language and coinage was Latin. The religious focal point of the **Corinthian** forum was the temple at the west end dedicated to the imperial family. It was of Roman construction and towered over all the other temples as an ever present symbol of the dominant imperial presence.

When **Paul** came to **Corinth** to begin **his** ministry, the city teemed with commerce as the vital link between its eastern provinces, attracting traders from everywhere in the empire. Throngs attended the Isthmian games. A building boom occurred between the reigns of Augustus and Nero, making **Corinth** arguably the most dazzling and modern city of the Roman provinces. Many inhabitants were so affluent that wealth and brazen displays became the hallmark of **Corinth**, which contrasted with the relative poverty of the surrounding countryside of Achaia. The Greeks tried as best they could to preserve their traditional culture; however, **the Corinthians** indulged in new attitudes and ways of life fueled by new wealth and unrestrained by ancestral tradition. As a result, the province and its capital were in many respects worlds apart. **Corinth** rose in status as a Roman colony, while the surrounding areas tied to the Greek past decreased in status.

This letter should be read against the background of a mercantile society, where the citizens valued trade, business, profit in the pursuit of success above everything else. These values fed the zeal to attain public status, to promote one's own honor, and to secure power. The culture was drunk with the marks of social advancement and status. The result was a wild scramble for prestige and wealth. Schmoozing, massaging a superior's ego, rubbing shoulders with the powerful, pulling strings, scratching each other's back, and dragging rivals' names through the mud – all describe what was required to attain success in this society. Possessing wealth cleared the path for social climbing because it enabled one to buy friends and clients through extravagant spending and win power and influence.

The implications of this backdrop for understanding the problems that

beset the Corinthian church should not be underestimated. Few believers could have been unscathed by the dominant culture that surrounded them. Most, if not all, of the problems that Paul addresses were hatched from the influence of this setting. Values that opposed the message of the cross – particularly those related to honor and status so basic to the Greco-Roman social system, in which power displaying itself in ruthlessness and self-advancement as thought to be the only sensible course – infected **the Corinthian** church, destroying its fellowship and witness as some members sought to balance worldly values with godly values.

Secular wisdom – which reflected the code of conduct of the social elites, who jostled one another for power, prestige, and popularity – had its hold on members of the church. Its worldly values played havoc on **Paul's** attempt to build a community based on love, selflessness, and the equal worth of every member. **Corinthian** society was riddled by competitive individualism, and this spirit spilled over into the relationships in the church as wealthier members competed for followers. Socially arrogant and self-important people appear to have dominated the church. It is likely that they flaunted their symbols of status, wisdom, influence, and family pedigree, and looked down on others of lesser status. They appear to have wanted to preserve the social barriers that permeated their social world, but were at odds with the cross of **Messiah**. Sadly, for some, the church in **Corinth** had become merely another area to compete for status.

The conflicting factions within the church did not revolve around the fine points of theology, but developed between rival leading figures who may have been the hosts of different house churches. **Paul** does not address specifically the theology of the factions but condemns the fact that **the Corinthians** were aligning **themselves** along party lines and around specific people, who apparently developed and encouraged personality cults. These unnamed individuals in the church were likely to be wealthier and influential, and were unduly influenced by worldly wisdom. Those who provided homes for worship were most likely the culprits. They could exert more influence in their home than in a neutral meeting place. Because they ranked higher socially, and because the group met on their home turf, they could control worship practices and even doctrine. As such, they would be looked upon by others as examples to follow.



The spirit of the world (2:12) is synonymous with **the world's wisdom (1:20** and **3:19)**. Thus, it was the destructive influence of **the world's wisdom** on members of the church that laid behind most of the problems that **Paul** addresses in the letter. It, not some imagined theological dispute swirling around **Peter**, **Apollos**, or **Paul** sparked off the rivalries ripping apart the fellowship. It is behind **the Corinthians'** attraction to flashy displays of knowledge, wisdom, and spiritual gifts. It throws light on why someone pursued a lawsuit against another believer **(6:1-11)**, why some sought to justify eating food sacrificed to idols so they could participate fully in their society **(8:1** to **11:1)**, why the issue of head coverings during worship became a problem **(11:2-16)**, and why some wished to vaunt their spiritual gifts above others **(12:1** to **14:40)**. **Paul** pictures the church as divided into "haves" and "have-nots" **(11:22)**. Since one needed to affirm one's wealth and social status to confirm one's identity in the culture of the day, the "haves" showed no reservations about humiliating the "have-nots" at **the meal of the Lord**, thus widening the division in the church **(11:17-34)**. These cultural values may shed light on aspects of the man living with his mother-in-law, and the church's incriminating silence **(5:-18)**.[6]

In understanding the roots of the social problems that plagued **the Corinthians**, it is helpful to understand the stark contrast between the issues that **Paul** addresses in **First Thessalonians** and those in **First Corinthians**. Although they were founded within months of each other, nothing could be more obvious than their interaction with the pagan world outside the church. Believers in **Thessalonica** were at odds with **the world (First Thessalonians 1:6, 2:2** and **14-16, 3:3)**, and had a sense of alienation and hostility toward **it (First Thessalonians 4:5** and **13, 5:7)**. However, there is no reference to **the Corinthian** church's alienation from

their surrounding culture in either **First** or **Second Corinthians**. **Paul** contrasts the affliction and dishonor of the apostles with the relative tranquility of the **Corinthian** believers **(First Corinthians 4:9-13, 15:30-32, 16:9)**. In fact, **the Corinthian** believers appeared to be getting along quite well with **their** surrounding pagan society**. Paul** could envision them participating in the dining rooms of pagan temples **(8:10)** and being invited to share in meals in the homes of unbelievers **(10:27)**. Unbelievers dropped into worship services **(14:24-25)**. And some members of the church used the civil court system to bring lawsuits against other believers **(6:1-8)**. Apparently, they had no problem about being married to a pagan society that was inherently hostile to the wisdom of the cross. In **Corinth**, no cultural impact, so central to the preaching of the Good News **(1:18-25)** is evident. Their faith hadn't created any significant social or moral realignment in their lives. They faced little or no social ostracism, and this lack of external pressure contributed to their internal conflict.

Paul was intent on evangelizing unbelievers and preaching the Gospel **(9:19-23; 10:32-33)**, but **he** viewed the world as a dark place in need of evangelizing, and emphasized that **bad company ruins good character (15:33)**. **His** instance throughout the letter is that the church is **holy** and **set apart (1:2)** from a world doomed to be destroyed, would not have been necessary in **Thessalonica**. Therefore, **the Corinthian** believers were not a cohesive community – but a club – whose meetings provided important moments of spiritual insight, but had no impact on their city or culture. They gladly participated in the church as one aspect of their lives. They compartmentalized. The church was not the core of their lives; thus, they could remain fully integrated in **Corinthian** society.[7]

The problem was not that the church was in Corinth; the problem was that too much of Corinth was in the church. Paul sought to disarm the warring factions, to bolster the sense of their common union in **Messiah**, and to widen the boundaries between the church and its surrounding culture. **He** sought to reform their values so that they lived in a manner consistent with the cross, and to make them aware that **God's** measure of judgment was the only thing that mattered. **Paul** showed that **he** had personally abandoned **his** concern for social status because the message of the cross makes it detestable. In fact, **Ha'Shem** has already made that judgment known in the death and resurrection of **Messiah**, with the result that the world can be divided into those who are being saved and those who are perishing.[8]