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Corinth's Moral Climate

R. Wayne Stacy
Liberty University, wrstacy@liberty.edu

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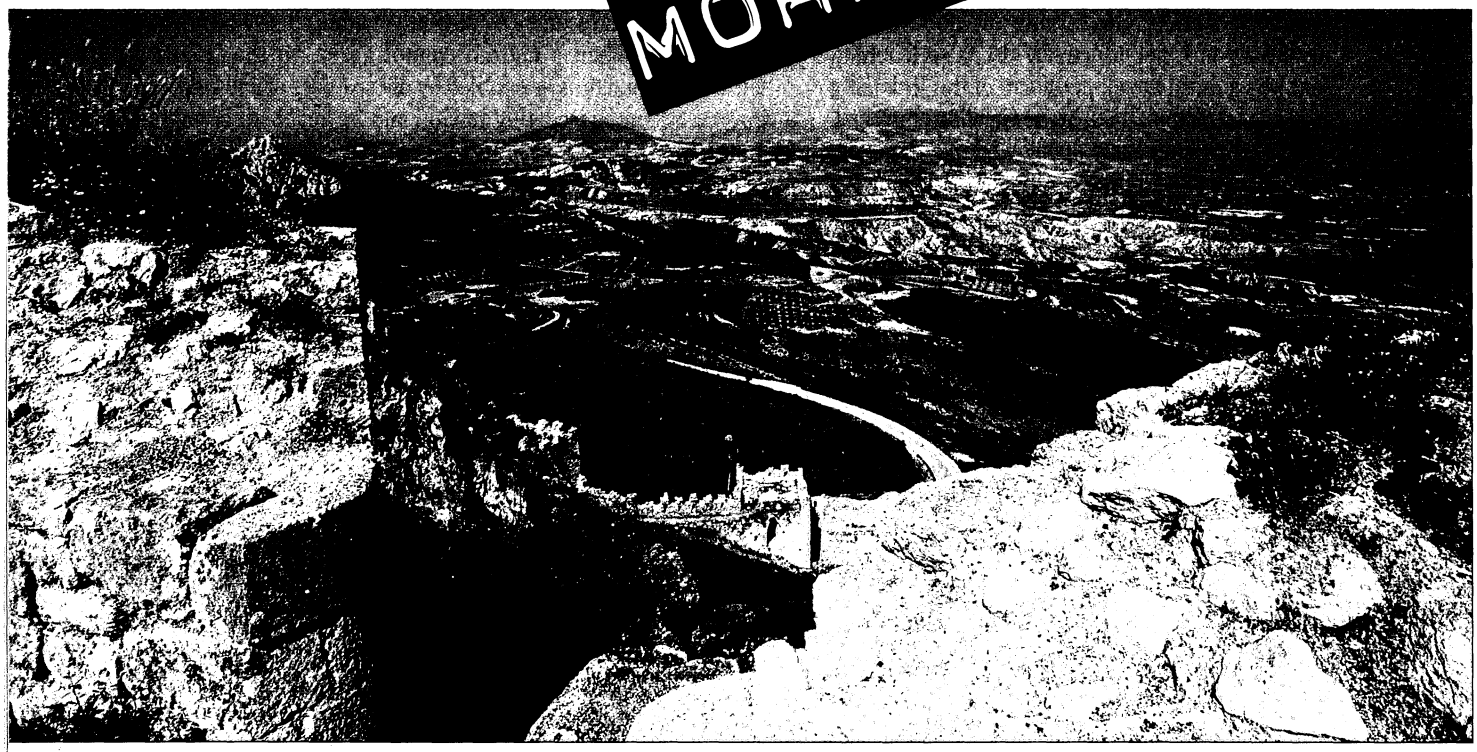
CORINTH'S MORAL CLIMATE



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO BOB SCHATZ (11/7/8)

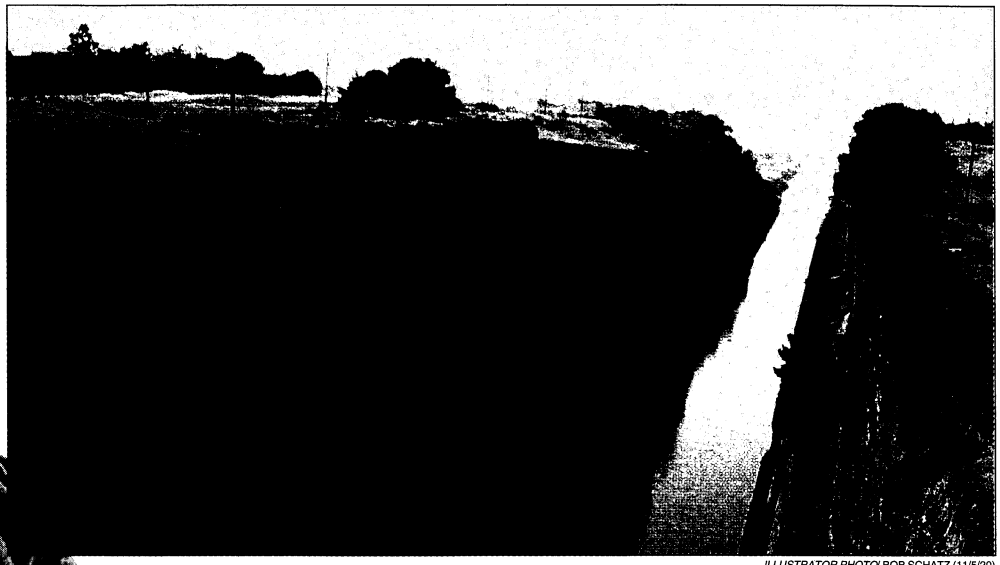
BY R. WAYNE STACY

PAUL REMINDED THE CORINTHIAN Christians that their lives prior to their becoming Christians had been characterized by promiscuous and immoral behavior (see 1 Cor. 6:11). The litany of immorality that precedes this indictment makes Paul's allegation that "such were some of you" all the more striking (see 1 Cor. 6:9-10, NASB). Paul invoked a similar list earlier in the same letter (see 1 Cor. 5:9-10). Apparently, Paul had written the Corinthians, laying down the moral principle, "no association with immoral people"; and the Corinthians in turn had responded to Paul's instructions by asking how this could be accomplished in a place like Corinth! Paul's reply is telling: I did not mean that you were not to associate with immoral persons of *this* world, since to do that you would have to go out of *this* world altogether (1 Cor. 5:10, italics mine). The exchange indicates how thoroughly pagan Corinth was in Paul's time.

What made Corinth the ancient world's "sin city"? What factors produced a moral ethos in which promiscuity could take root so deep and take hold so hard? History, geography, demographics, economics, politics, and religion all played a part.

Corinth was a city that had lived two lives. Greek Corinth rose to prominence in the seventh century B.C. By the end of the fifth century, Corinth had developed into a prosperous city-state with a reputa-

Above: A panoramic view of first century and modern Corinth from atop ancient Corinth.
Right: Statue of Asklepios, A Greek god of healing worshiped in Corinth.
Upper right: The canal across the isthmus from Corinth to Cenchreae facing east.
Far right: Laver (wash basin) from the temple of Poseidon at Isthmia (7th cent. B.C.). Before entering the games, a person would wash and swear he had kept the rules for nine months.



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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/KEN TOUCHTON/VATICAN MUSEUM/ROME (6/18)

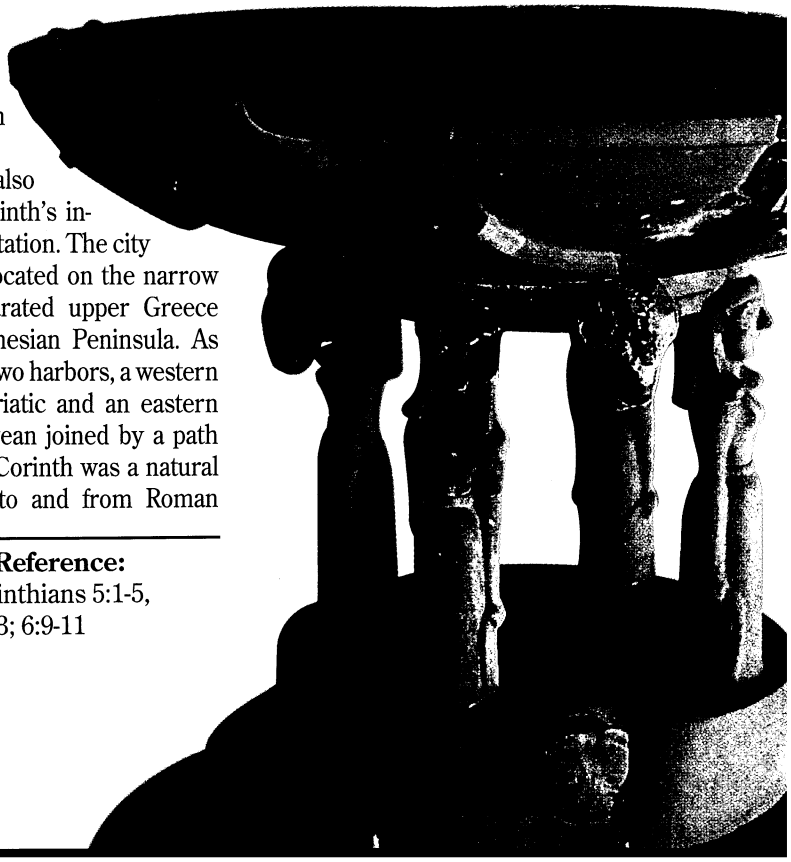
tion for wealth unrivaled in its day.[1] The city was destroyed, however, in 146 B.C. by the Romans and lay desolate for nearly a century until Julius Caesar granted colonial status to it in 46 B.C. and set about rebuilding Corinth as a Roman city. Roman Corinth was much more multicultural than was Greek Corinth. The colonial settlers were recruited primarily among freed slaves, military veterans, and the poorer classes. The overall effect of Corinth's new, more diverse population was to make the city more culturally and morally diverse than it had been as a Greek city-state. Old moral restraints no longer prevailed among Corinth's Roman population.

Geography also contributed to Corinth's infamous moral reputation. The city was strategically located on the narrow isthmus that separated upper Greece from the Peloponnesian Peninsula. As such, Corinth had two harbors, a western harbor on the Adriatic and an eastern harbor on the Aegean joined by a path called the *diolkos*. Corinth was a natural funnel for traffic to and from Roman colonies and provinces on the Mediterranean.

The overland route between the two harbors made Corinth the fulcrum of the Mediterranean. The vigorous shipping industry generated by the *diolkos* supported a large service industry of sailors, longshoremen, haulers, dock workers, and shipbuilders, in addition to support services such as hotel keepers, cooks, grooms, and saloon keepers, and prostitutes.

Corinth was also an emerging "growth center" in the ancient world, bringing to the city artisans, craftsmen, stonemasons, foundry workers, and oth-

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ/ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM IN ISTHMIA(11/9/18)



Lesson Reference:
EBS: 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 9-13; 6:9-11

ers associated with the construction industry. This growth was due in large part to Corinth's being a political center in the Roman world. Corinth was both a Roman imperial colony and a senatorial provincial capital. Numerous new buildings were constructed to support the industries generated by government business. Archaeologists have found evidence of significant construction in Corinth, especially during the reigns of Tiberius (A.D. 14–37) and Claudius (A.D. 41–54). Paul was in Corinth during the latter part of the reign of Claudius and would have witnessed the expansive restorations and new construction projects being undertaken. Indeed, this may account for his frequent use of "construction language" in 1 Corinthians (for example, 3:10). Doubtlessly, these construction workers also supported the brothels, saloons, and other "recreational industries" that contributed to Corinth's reputation as the "Las Vegas of the Ancient World." So notorious were these "recreational industries" that the Greeks actually coined the term *corinthiazesthai*—literally, "to live the 'Corinthian life'"—as a synonym for immorality. As evidence that this reputation was well deserved, archaeologists have uncovered some 33 wine shops or "liquor lockers," some of which even had underground cisterns for cooling drinks.[2]

Additionally, pilgrims frequented Corinth, sampling its "services." Some journeyed to the city for the purpose of visiting Corinth's famous Asklepieion, a shrine dedicated to the Greek god of healing, Asclepius. Pilgrims stayed in Corinth, frequently with their family members, sometimes for a period of weeks or even months while the sick person sought treatment at the Asklepieion.

Others came to Corinth to attend the Isthmian Games, held biennially a few miles from the city, including the summer of A.D. 51 when Paul was there. The games were dedicated to the Greek god of the sea, Poseidon. These games attracted athletes from all over the Greco-Roman world. Typical of the Greek style, the athletes competed nude. Raucous crowds of spectators were interspersed with merchants hawking their wares, itinerant teachers/preachers/writers expounding their latest philosophy to whomever would listen, and pickpockets and hucksters trying to profit from the unsuspecting mass of humanity.

Strange as it may sound to us, religion also helped create the licentious ambiance of first-century Corinth. Being multicultural and "consumer-oriented," Corinth tried to satisfy even the most discriminating pagan's desires. Gods and goddesses worshiped at Corinth included the traditional gods/goddesses of the Greek pantheon (Zeus, Hera, Athena, and Hermes); the Greek goddess of good luck, Tyche (Fortuna was her Roman name); Apollo, who seems to have had his own temple in Corinth; Poseidon (Roman Neptune); Asclepius; and Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of fertility and love (Roman Venus), the patron goddess of the city.

BEING MULTICULTURAL AND "CONSUMER-ORIENTED," CORINTH TRIED TO SATISFY EVEN THE MOST DISCRIMINATING PAGAN'S DESIRES.

Prominently situated on the summit of the Acrocorinth, the temple of Aphrodite dominated Corinth's landscape in Paul's day. Associated with the worship of Aphrodite was the practice of sacred prostitution. Since the time of Solon (sixth century B.C.), Greek cities openly sanctioned brothels, regarding them as "supportive of family life." Consequently, burgeoning populations of courtesans, known as "ethereals," plied their trade in Corinth, often commanding large prices for their services.

But the practice of sacred prostitution, that is, prostitution associated with the worship of a god or goddess, has baffled scholars in that it does not appear to have been associated with the promotion of fertility per se (common to many pagan religions), but seems rather to have celebrated sex as such. According to a famous passage from the Roman geographer, Strabo, over a thousand sacred prostitutes and courtesans reputedly "worked" the temple of Aphrodite, though some accuse Strabo of hyperbole.[3] However, Dio Chrysostom seems to corroborate Strabo's portrait because he spoke of large numbers of prostitutes gathered at Corinth on account of the harbor, the courtesans, and because the city was situated at the crossroads of Greece.[4]

All of these factors coalesced to make Corinth a missionary setting that presented Paul both an unexcelled challenge and an unparalleled opportunity. Here Paul had taken the gospel into the very teeth of pagandom. If Christianity could take root here, it could take root anywhere. The Corinthian congregation was for Paul a "mission impossible." He believed that Christianity could survive and even thrive without resorting to the coercive moral restraints inherent within Jewish legalism. If Paul could birth a congregation of former pagans who live morally upright lives without first requiring them to become Jews, then he would have forever silenced his critics who claimed that without obedience to the law, one could not be saved. That Paul could describe with brutal candor the moral bankruptcy that characterized first-century Corinth and then say of the Corinthian Christians, "and such were some of you" demonstrates just how difficult a mission this was. That he could go on to say, however, "But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" demonstrates that, those difficulties notwithstanding, Paul had succeeded in that mission.

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[1]See Strabo, *Geography* 8. 6. 20, 23.
[2]Dan P. Cole, "Corinth & Ephesus," *Bible Review*, December 1988, 25.
[3]Compare Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 12, and Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology, Good News Studies* 6 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc. 1983), 125.
[4]Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses*, 8:381.

Wayne Stacy is Professor of Religious Studies, Gardner-Webb University, Boiling Springs, North Carolina.