

Mary, Mother of Jesus Church
Advent Faith Formation = 2021
St. Paul's Letters to the Church at Corinth

Handout – 1: Introduction to the Church at Corinth

The City of Corinth

- Southern Greece, west of Athens. Capital of Roman Province of Achaia
- In the 1st century CE, it was a flourishing trade center with 3 major harbors
- City's population was a mixture of Greek, Roman, and Jewish, but thoroughly Roman in lifestyle
- City was plagued by immorality, idol worship, pagan festivals

Paul's stay in Corinth

- 2nd Missionary Journey 51-52 CE (stayed 18 months)
- Worked as a tent maker with Aquila and Priscilla (Jews from Rome)
- Paul preached in the synagogue until Jew brought charges that he was undermining Mosaic Law
- Charges heard by Roman Pro-Consul, Lucius Julius Gallio, who dismissed them as Paul had not broken any Roman law.
- Paul left the synagogue and turned his attention to the Gentiles, preaching in the house of Titus Justus (a Gentile who had converted to Judaism)

The Church at Corinth

- Largely Gentile in membership (approx.. 150 people....large and lively congregation)
- Largely lower class, some even slaves
- Church was a reflection of the immorality and pagan worship of the city
- Term: Korinthiazomai = to live immorally as a Corinthian

Paul's First Epistle (I Corinthians)

- Written from Ephesus, around 54-56 CE
- Paul received news at Ephesus from 2 sources: members of Chloe's household, and a letter from the church at Corinth. These 2 sources led to the writing of the First Epistle
- Epistle is masterful in its restraint and kindness toward an awful situation. The church at Corinth was the worst of the early churches regarding immoral behavior and abuses

Paul's Second Epistle (II Corinthians)

- Written from Macedonia, around 57 CE
- "Letter of the Tears" (possibly II Corinthians chapters 10-13)
- False teaching has infiltrated the church at Corinth, denying Paul's legitimate apostolate and false doctrine
- In this Epistle, Paul must first redefine his apostolate and ministry
- Then he must discuss the same issues as in the First Epistle
- Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the church at Corinth (50 years post-Paul) addressing the very same issues as Paul

The Issues at Corinth

- 1) Gross unashamed immorality and sexual activity
 - Sexual activity and perversion viewed as normal part of life
 - Confusion about the single life vs. marriage
 - Issue of incest
- 2) Idolatry/Social Activities
 - Entire city participated in frequent pagan festivals, including church members
 - Meat sold in market may have been used in sacrifice to idols and no way to identify
 - Conflict between strict Jewish dietary laws and lack of Gentile laws
 - Social conflict between classes when feasting and/or eating together
- 3) No established aristocracy/authority (within church)
 - Each church member followed their “favorite leader” which created factions
 - Women were independent within the congregation and actively participated
- 4) Litigation
 - Church members sued each other in the Roman public courts
 - Conformed to the ways of city citizens in bringing charges against each other
 - Problems with patronizing prostitutes
- 5) Influence of Eastern Mystery Cults
 - Eastern mystery cults appealed to the Roman citizens because of: 1) close fellowship, 2) forgiveness of sin, 3) some concept of personal salvation, 4) filled a spiritual hunger that official pagan religions did not.
 - Cult of Isis was especially popular: supported female deity and female leadership
- 6) Intellectual climate of Corinth
 - Influence of Greco-Roman intellectuals promoted ideals such as Matter is evil/Spirit is good, bodily resurrection was repugnant, since body was evil sins of the flesh could not be avoided
 - City of great wealth/great poverty/great gulf between
 - Both slaves and free lived and worshiped side by side, causing strong factions
- 7) Disunity and party factions
 - The ways in which the citizens celebrated pagan feasts brought about petty schisms
 - Citizens were highly partisan in beliefs and would side with faction whether they agreed or not. This led to disunity within the church.
- 8) Church doctrinal issues
 - Problem of Apollos and his preaching
 - Abuses of the Lord’s Supper
 - Mis-use of spiritual gifts
 - Confusion over bodily resurrection
 - Grace offerings vs. obligatory offerings of a set percentage
 - Women in church