

## "2 CORINTHIANS: AN HISTORICAL FICTION"

(George Guthrie)

As he stepped onto the gravel of the Lechaemum road, heading south from the Asclepion back to the forum, Stephanas was still a bit rattled by the meeting, not used to such a confrontational discussion with such a powerful man. "Why in the world does Lucius want to meet at the Asclepion?" his wife, Alba, had wondered that morning as they had breakfast in the garden. From the slight rise on which their Craneum neighborhood sat, the view of Corinth spread out before them in all its vastness like a giant patchwork quilt draping the landscape, flowing down to the Lechaemum port.

Stephanas loved this city. It was flourishing, and his business had flourished along with it. The wild mix of travelers, tourists, merchants from all of the world, ports crammed with exotic goods, new buildings going up as the great men tried to outdo each other, their wonderful, plentiful baths and springs, their enviable sewage system . . . Horace had written, "It is not the privilege of every man to visit Corinth." But here Stephanas lived. He perhaps was not one of the elite, but as a successful merchant Stephanas felt great pride in this wealthy city of thousands. There were the desperately poor, of course, a number of them now associated with the church, but opportunities for the population generally were greater in Corinth than in most places. And since Paul had come with the gospel, Stephanas saw his place and his prosperity—his purpose in the world—in a very new light.

Of course Stephanas knew why Lucius Domitius Felix had chosen the Asclepion. It was a lovely place, the complex dedicated to the healing god. Stephanas had attended weddings there from time to time. Out from the city center and near the northern wall, the temple grounds were beautifully groomed, comfortable, and quiet. But there was more. It was an obvious way of pushing back, not even a veiled attempt at pushing back. When Paul's letter had arrived last year, Lucius had heard it read and then read it himself. In that letter the apostle had answered many of the church's pressing questions, including the one about eating meat from a temple. So Lucius was quite aware of Paul's perspective. The Asclepion was a nice place to eat, of course, one of the nicest in the city. But the temple meat roasting in that temple was not the draw for Lucius. No. The Asclepion was a defiant retreat of sorts at which to talk about Lucius's ongoing "concerns" about Paul, concerns that had been building ever since the "undignified tentmaker," who "dirtied his hands with manual labor," had refused Lucius's patronage.

So as he kicked gravel along the Lechaemum road, some 400 paces farther into the city's heart, he thought back through the day and how that difficult conversation had unfolded. That morning Stephanas had walked from home to the city center to conduct business before the meeting. Having passed Maximos's tavern on his left, he entered the Forum from the southwest end. He had greeted Erastus briefly. The city treasurer, walking briskly past the area in front of Apollo's and Aphrodite's temples, was on his way to an office in the South Stoa, weaving through a crowd of shoppers, priests, tourists, and merchants heading in all directions. The Forum, almost 200 paces long and some 125 paces deep on the west end, was massive by anyone's estimation, a wide-open space of buzz and bustle. As he continued, Stephanas made a quick stop at a banker in one of the Forum's center shops, and then on to a jeweler to pick up a gift for his daughter Theodora, whose twelfth birthday was coming up on *Kalends Octobris* (Oct. 1).

He had seen Achaicus and Chloe talking just across the



Forum's east end, near the Peirene Fountain. Stephanas made his way over to them and told them about the meeting that was to take place with Lucius, asking for prayer. Each of the three had been staunch defenders of Paul and had spoken out boldly during Titus's recent visit. Following that gut-wrenching letter from Paul, they had drawn most of the house churches firmly to the apostle's side. But none of them embraced the illusion that tensions in the church were laid to rest. Matters were so complex, so difficult to work through, what with people coming and going in the household groups throughout the city and region. The church was still very young, not quite five years old, and the blend of classes, education, cultural backgrounds, personalities, and levels of spiritual maturity could be dynamic but fragile. The majority of the house groups in the city, as well as those from Tenea, Cenchreae, and Cromna, resolutely made a fresh commitment to the apostle and his mission. Unfortunately, the group at Crommyon had remained cold toward Paul (several who continued in sexually immoral behavior were in that house), as had the small group led by Lucius's steward and, of course, the group of students from the school of Alexandros, among whom was Lucius's oldest son. But generally, the response to Paul's heartrending letter had been positive, and Titus left two weeks later to give the apostle that news.

So this morning, as the sun had climbed toward noon, Stephanas had continued his walk toward the Asclepion, past the North Market and the Theater, out through blocks of shops and homes, finally arriving at his destination. Lucius had reserved a private room and had ordered food. He had with him David and Samuel, "wise professional speakers," as Lucius liked to refer to them, men who had even won some notoriety in rhetor competitions at the games last spring. They and a number of their disciples had arrived from the East two years ago, shortly before Paul had arrived in Ephesus, bringing with them recommendation letters from obscure church leaders back east. Like Apollos, David and Samuel obviously had advanced training in rhetoric; they were good speakers, by most standards of the culture. But unlike the Alexandrian, the content of their "preaching" always seemed "spiritless," devoid of the gospel message and power. Though words about Jesus and the gospel were used at times, there was no substance to the teaching: no clear doctrine, no ethical foundations for living. Their speaking entertained but did nothing to promote mission, or righteous living, or community. It just seemed to focus mainly on the exalted Jesus as a means of glory, success, and status. Some had been taken in and were increasingly under their harsh influence, and now these impressive public speakers were aligned with Lucius.

The meeting had not gone well. The arguments against Paul, presented by Lucius and the other two, had sounded wonderfully reasonable; Stephanas had heard most of them before. They claimed that the church was acting unwisely, unreasonably. Paul's critics sounded hurt, offended by the apostle's arrogance, his inattention to social conventions, his teachings, and especially his "wishy-washy character." In short, they tagged Paul as a weak, ineffective leader who had brought on the current "crisis" in the church. David and Samuel appealed to Stephanas's Jewish background, a heritage they shared and of which they were very proud. Honestly, Stephanas felt bullied, cowed by the confrontation, glad when the meeting was behind him. Although the majority of the church were "firmly committed to the apostle, these pockets of opposition were worrisome; powerful and gifted people were involved.

As he continued now back south, into the city's heart, Stephanas had business at his warehouse that called for his attention. He needed to check on a shipment of Italian lamps that should have arrived in port yesterday, and he wanted Crestus to follow up on an order of glazed bowls from the physician's consortium. Stephanas stopped at the public latrine and felt like visiting the baths, to wash away the tension of the last hour. If only dealing with Paul's opponents could be so easy! He wished the apostle would come back to Corinth, or at least send another letter.