



DIGGING DEEPER

WEEK 1

My Town

The places where we live shape us in ways we may not even realize. What is considered “normal” or acceptable by the community where we work, go to school, attend sporting events, shop, and eat rubs off on us.

I grew up in a small town in East Texas. In my hometown, barbeque and Mexican food were considered the epitome of good food, and I thought every high school had a rodeo team and a large chapter of the Future Farmers of America (FFA). Living in Texas, I was used to the sunshine. When I moved north to attend Bible college, I realized there isn’t as much sunshine everywhere. That was just one of the characteristics of life in my hometown. In many ways my town defined “normal” for me until I traveled and met people from different places. Even though I haven’t lived in that small East Texas town in over two decades, it shaped who I am today in many ways.

Now living in the Midwest, I find myself in a different community where hometown college sports teams are not taken lightly and high schools have lacrosse and field hockey teams rather than rodeo teams. These are just minor examples of how a town can shape us. For the original audience of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, their town had an impact on them as well. By learning a little about the geography, history, religion, and customs of Corinth, we can discover how the town shaped the Corinthian believers.

Geography

Corinth was located on “the four-and-one-half-mile (5,950-meter) Isthmus that bridged the Peloponnese and the mainland.”¹ Many ships docked on one side of the Isthmus and carried their cargo overland through Corinth to another ship waiting on the other side;

this saved going around the Peloponnese (peninsula). This made Corinth a commercial center for people of many different nationalities, offering a truck-stop variety of pleasures for sale.

History

Corinth had flourished as a Greek city-state but then came into conflict with Rome and was destroyed by the Roman consul Lucius Mummius in 146 B.C. For 100 years Corinth was uninhabited until Julius Caesar began rebuilding the city in 44 B.C.²

Commentator Gordon Fee notes two reasons the city might have been rebuilt:

1. Corinth's strategic location for commerce gave it the potential for economic boom. It had water, harbors, and "control of the Isthmian games, which ranked just below the Olympian in importance."
2. Freedmen from Rome, whose status was just above that of slaves, repopulated the city of Corinth. Establishing a city in Corinth gave them an opportunity for advancement and eliminated potential trouble that might have been caused by their overabundance in Rome.³

Much like the pilgrims headed to the Americas in the 1600s, Corinth was rebuilt by ambitious people looking for a fresh start. With this came an independent spirit and new money. Within fifty years, the city of Corinth was thriving economically. Fee notes, "Since money attracts people like dead meat attracts flies, Corinth quickly experienced a great influx of people from both West and East, along with all the attendant gains and ills of such growth."⁴

Not everyone enjoyed instant wealth. A large population of slaves and artisans made up a significant percentage of the people of Corinth. Along with economic concerns came moral difficulties. In fact, "vice and religion flourished side by side."⁵

Religion

Expression of religion in Corinth was as varied as the city's population. It is said that at least twenty-six sacred places existed in Corinth. Fee notes that "all of this evidence together suggests that Paul's Corinth was at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world."⁶

While Corinth had a Jewish synagogue, Jews were a minority of the population of the city. Christians also made up a small fraction of the population. They were surrounded by neighbors, friends, and coworkers who ascribed to a melting pot of religious beliefs.

Customs

Imagine this scene as if Corinth is “your town”: Open markets offer all sorts of wares to citizens and visitors to the city. The Isthmian games (second only to the Olympics) bring in crowds seeking food, shelter, and souvenirs. Philosophers gather in the town square to discuss old and new ideas about the meaning of life. Different groups congregate at sacred places to worship a garden variety of gods. Family gatherings and business meetings take place in local temples that serve as a sort of open-air banquet hall or restaurant. Dock workers, soldiers, tentmakers, merchants, religious leaders, prostitutes, slaves, community leaders, and *nouveau riche* (new rich) business owners can be seen throughout the community.

If Corinth were your town, how do you think the geography, history, religion, and customs of the city would shape you? How do you think the town impacted the Corinthian believers’ newfound faith in Jesus? Fee observes, “Although they were the Christian church in Corinth, an inordinate amount of Corinth was yet in them, emerging in a number of attitudes and behaviors that required radical surgery without killing the patient. This is what [1 Corinthians] attempts to do.”⁷

Think for a moment about “your town.” Or if you’ve moved over the course of your life, there may be several towns to recall. How have the places you’ve lived shaped you? How have they contributed to your definition of “normal”? Some of the influences of our towns are beneficial; others can rot our souls if we do not allow God’s Word to transform us.

As we dig deep into the book of 1 Corinthians, we will need to unwrap the culture of the original audience to see God’s overriding principles. This will mean remembering what Corinth was like to the recipients of Paul’s letter and asking God to help us see how our own towns have influenced us.

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1. Gordon Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians, Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 1.
 2. *Ibid.*, 1-2.
 3. *Ibid.*, 2.
 4. *Ibid.*
 5. *Ibid.*
 6. *Ibid.*, 3.
 7. *Ibid.*, 4.

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