

Appendix: A Look at First-Century Corinth

History

One of the most important cities in Greece from the 8th to the 2nd centuries B.C.E., Corinth was a leader in resisting Roman expansion and was destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C.E. Out of the ruins, Julius Caesar resettled the site as a Roman city in 44 B.C.E., about a century before Paul arrived in the city. This first-century Roman city was the capital of the Achaia province, which included all of southern Greece.

Geography

Corinth was located on an isthmus (a narrow strip of land connecting two larger land areas) between the northern and southern parts of Greece. Corinth's two harbors offered access to both Asia and Italy, making it a crucial stop on a major Mediterranean trade route. The walled city enclosed an area more than twice as large as Athens. In addition to the coastal terrain, the land offered some flat areas that were fertile and well watered, sloping hills, and mountains. Visit the following website for maps of Corinth: gbgm-umc.org/umw/corinthians/cityarch.stm

Economy

Described by the second-century writer Plutarch as one of three economic centers of Greece, Corinth flourished as a commercial and administrative city and also included healthy agricultural, manufacturing, and tourism sectors. Tourists were drawn to religious shrines in the city and to the Isthmian games, a major athletic contest held every two

years to honor the Greek god Poseidon. These pan-Hellenic games included contests for both men and women and featured artistic events as well.

Society

This large, prosperous city had a population of about 75,000 that represented a diversity of cultural, religious, and ethnic groups. Although some among the city's elite classes had distinguished family lineage, many, including former slaves, had achieved power through the accumulation of wealth. Others gained status from military service or ties to the Roman government.

As a port city, Corinth drew numerous visitors who added to the city's rich blend of cultures. These travelers included sailors who, having been at sea for months, arrived in Corinth seeking to satisfy their physical and sexual appetites. The city's thriving sex trade earned it a reputation that goes back to the Greek poet Aristophanes (4th century B.C.E.) who coined the word "Corinthianize," meaning to engage in sexual promiscuity.

Religion

When Paul introduced Christianity to the city, the religious scene was already crowded. The Roman government permitted any number of religions to coexist, so long as they did not disturb the peace. These cults did not require exclusive devotion, so people might worship different gods for different purposes.

Among the Roman cults Paul would have found in Corinth:

- The cult of the emperor, which required worship out of civic duty rather than for spiritual enrichment.

- Worship of traditional Roman gods or Greek gods that had been adopted by the Romans. Especially popular in Corinth were Aphrodite, Dionysus, and Isis, in whose honor there was a procession from Corinth to the harbor at Cenchreae each spring.

- Mystery religions that offered intense emotional experiences. Best known of these is Mithraism, which used the blood of a bull in its initiation rite.

The temples of some of these gods, including Aphrodite, housed temple prostitutes whose services were used by worshipers as a means to commune with the god. Such religious prostitution conflicted with Paul's message of sexual purity and fidelity (see Session Three).

Another conflict for the early Corinthian Christians centered around animal sacrifice, which was the primary element in many pagan rituals. Complex ceremonies, these sacrifices served as

gifts to placate the deity, meals to feed the deity, or as a purification rite for the participants. The meat from the sacrifice was consumed at the close of the ritual or was sold in the marketplace and could wind up on anyone's dinner table (see Session Two).

In addition to pagan cults, Corinth was home to Jewish refugees who had been expelled from Rome in 49 C.E. Some of the difficulties within the Corinthian church stemmed from the differences between Jewish and Gentile members. For example, worship of idols had been largely purged from Judaism and was not a problem for the Jewish Christians. Pagan worship, however, was directed at images or shrines of the gods, so it was more difficult for Gentile Christians to adapt to the idea of one "invisible" God.

Into this complex religious scenario, Paul introduced Christianity. His continuing correspondence with the Corinthian church reflects the difficulties they faced in remaining faithful to God and each other.