

Flyover: From Knollwood to Corinth ... via Fertile *An Introduction to First Corinthians*

Today we begin a new message series of the New Testament letter of First Corinthians. We are going to do a flyover. The reason is to get a feel for the lay of the land.

For example, if we were to do a flyover of Knollwood, we would notice some changes that have taken place on the property.

Knollwood: 2002 – 2012: Google Earth

Then we might take a little side route here over to the booming metropolitan area of Fertile, Iowa. **Fertile, Iowa** If we turn a little north, you will see the place where I grew up. **Farm**

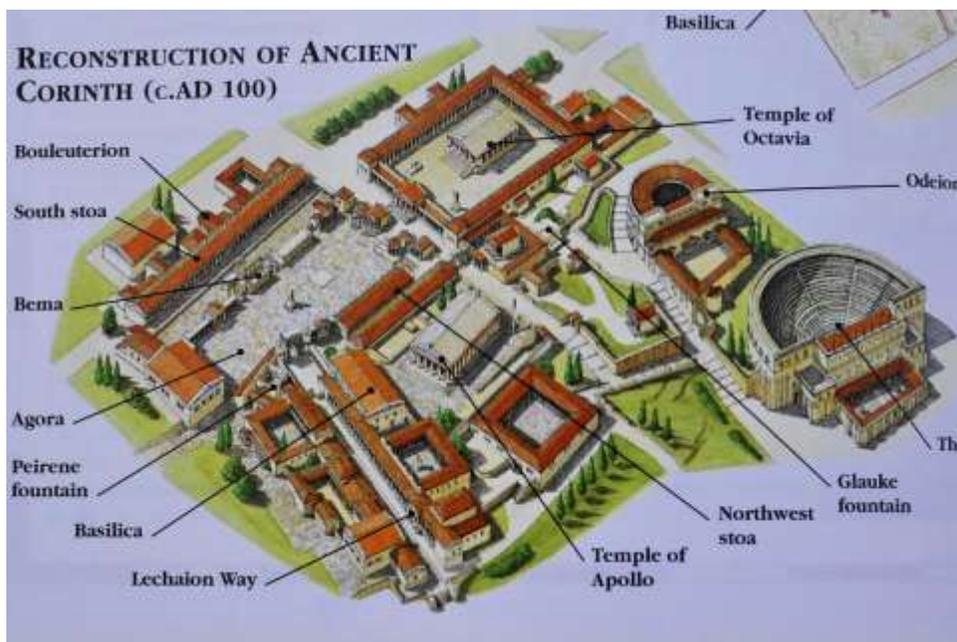
Now we move on from one cultural center to another: **Corinth, Greece.**

- The current site of modern-day Corinth
- Now look at the ancient site of this city.

If we back out a bit, we can get the bigger picture to see the lay of the land –

Now, if we zero back in to the ancient city, we can see the ruins of what was there when the Apostle Paul visited.

Here is a rendering of what this area looked like back then:



Ancient Corinth sat in a strategic location, giving it control over important trade routes. It became a center of trade and of industry. The city was dominated by what was called the Acro-corinth: a large flat-top rock upon which sat a temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. You can see this hill in the ruins today.



The city was destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. The males were apparently killed and the women and children sold into slavery. For 102 years, it was basically uninhabited.

Then sometime between 46 and 44 B.C., Julius Caesar decided to rebuild the city. It quickly recovered its prosperity and became capital of Achaia and the seat of the proconsul Augustus.

The city continued to be a prosperous center until it was taken over by the Turks in 1458. A devastating earthquake destroyed the ancient city in 1858. The new city of Corinth was built about three and one-half miles from the old. All that remains of ancient Corinth are ruins. Here is what you see today:







In the first century Corinth was the home for Roman freedmen, Greeks and immigrants from all over the region. There apparently was a large Jewish community. But the greatest influence on the city was that of Rome. So by the time the Apostle Paul comes to Corinth, it was culturally Roman.

Corinth had a strong mercantile society: trade, merchandizing, filled with an entrepreneurial spirit. This fed what one writer calls “zeal to attain public status, to promote one’s own honor, and to secure power” (Garland). This feeds pride and arrogance, both of which Paul encountered, not only in the city but also in the church.

Religiously, Corinth was a melting pot of a variety of religions. First of all, Roman culture was very polytheistic: many gods were worshipped. Second, as people moved into Corinth from around other regions, they brought their gods with them – gods which were assimilated into the local worship. This was sort of like a buffet line of gods and goddesses; pick out the ones you like and the practices of each that were suitable for and of interest to you.

By New Testament times, we are told there were at least 26 separate sacred places in Corinth. Many were temples of the gods of Greek and Roman pantheons. Others were worship centers for the mystery religions. In addition, there was also a Jewish synagogue as archeologists have discovered.

One focus of their religious practice was centered around Apollo. This was one of the most important and complex of the deities in ancient Greek and Roman religion, mythology and paganism. Apollo has been variously recognized as a god of light and the sun, truth and prophecy, healing, plague, music, poetry and more. This is all that remains of the great temple of Apollo.



Within Corinth there was a very sensual, sex-oriented culture. Sex was available readily with prostitutes and slaves. Corinth was a major port city so it had multitudes of prostitutes to cater to the desires of sailors and businessmen. Corinth became a by-word for evil and wickedness. Living like a Corinthian had become part of the Greek language with its drunken and immoral debauchery.

The Greek author, Aristophanes (approximately 450-385 B.C.), coined a new verb: *to Corinthianize*, meaning participation in immoral sexual practices. The archeological evidence suggests thriving homosexual practices also. A later historian (Strabo, who wrote about 7 B.C.) spoke of a thousand temple prostitutes plying their trade in Corinth during its peak of prosperity. He quoted an old proverb that sarcastically suggested, “Not every man is man enough to go to Corinth.”

Perhaps more than any other religious influence in Corinth was the imperial cult, worshipping political power as divine. The wisdom and genius of the emperor was a central focus of religious worship. Reverence for the imperial house and the offering of sacrifices and observance of various feasts were so important in Corinth as well as elsewhere within the Roman Empire. This might be why the Apostle Paul wrote in the letter First Corinthians:

For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords” – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. – *I Corinthians 8:5-6*

Paul issues a direct challenge and refutation of this cult worship of the emperor as god.

Well, this is the city to which Paul comes in his second missionary journey. Turn in your Bible to the book of Acts, chapter 18. Before we read of Paul’s time in Corinth, look at this map which sets out Paul’s path on this journey.



Read Acts 18:1-17

From the location and influence of Corinth, it makes sense that Paul would establish a church here and spend the amount of time that he did getting it established and growing.

We can determine the general timeframe of Paul's visit based upon the reference in Acts 18 to Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia. There is a fragment inscription that dates his time in office as from July 1, A.D. 51 to June 30, A.D. 52.

It was near the end of his 18-month stay that Paul, according to Acts 18, was brought before Gallio and his tribunal to give account of what he was preaching. This would suggest that Paul began his ministry in Corinth sometime in February/March A.D. 50.

The church that he established consisted of a diverse group of believers. There would have been Jews, Greek proselytes, Gentile God-fearers who accepted Judaism. There would have been those who had been devoted to the pantheon of various gods and goddesses in Corinthians worship. A real mixed bag of folks. We read in Acts 18 that Crispus, the ruler of the Jewish synagogue, and other prominent Jews left the synagogue to join the church. One estimate is that there were about a hundred people that comprised this outpost of Christianity in the pagan culture when Paul moved on. They were an island in a sea of paganism.

After 18 months in Corinth, Paul makes his way back to Palestine, ending up in Jerusalem to give a report of his journey. It's not long before Paul sets out again on his third missionary journey. He gets back to the city of Ephesus and settles in for a period of three years. Look at the map:



Sometime before this, he had written a letter back to the church in Corinth. He refers to this letter in chapter five, verse five:

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people...

We don't have that letter today, but Paul was obviously seeking to keep in touch with these believers. The letter we are going to study is a continuation of Paul staying in contact with those in Corinth. In chapter five, Paul continues:

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler – not even to eat with such a one. – *I Corinthians 5:9-11*

Word had come to Paul of all that was going on in the church and he sets down on paper how they are to deal with these problems. The letter, in some ways, is a “Survival Kit” for the church.

Here's the point I want to make this morning. The church was not immune from the influence of the culture. I repeat, the church was not immune from the influence of the culture – in relation to the religious practices, sexual mores, materialistic pursuit, societal status, and political allegiance in Corinth. The church was made up of those who had come out of that pagan culture and was surrounded by those influences which ran counter to the message of Jesus.

David Garland, in the introduction to his commentary on First Corinthians, writes about how this culture affected the church:

The implications of this backdrop for understanding the problems that beset the Corinthian church should not be underestimated. Few Christians could have been unaffected by the dominant culture surrounding them, even if they assimilated its values only subliminally. Most, if not all, of the problems that Paul addresses were hatched from the influence of this setting.

Values that were antithetical to the message of the cross – particularly those related to honor and status so basic to the Greco-Roman social system, in which power manifesting itself in ruthlessness and self-advancement is thought to be the only sensible course – percolated into the church, destroying its fellowship and its Christian witness as some members sought to balance civic norms with Christian norms.

Secular wisdom – which reflected the code of conduct of the social elites, who jostled one another for power, prestige, and popularity – had its hold on members of the church.

Its values played havoc on Paul's attempt to build a community built on love, selflessness, and the equal worth of every member.

Corinthian society was riddled by competitive individualism, and this ethos spilled over into the relationships in the church as wealthier members competed for followers. Socially pretentious and self-important individuals appear to have dominated the church. It is likely that they flaunted their symbols of status, wisdom, influence, and family pedigree and looked down on others of lesser status.

They appear to have wanted to preserve the social barriers of class and status that permeated their social world but were nullified in the cross of Christ. For some, the Christian community had become simply another arena to compete for status according to the societal norms.

Why should we study this first century letter contained in the New Testament? The church today is not immune from the influences of our culture! We are being inordinately influenced by the religious practices, sexual mores, materialistic pursuit, societal status, and political allegiance in our own culture. Many of the problems facing Corinth in the first century are the same we face in the twenty-first.

On the agenda in this letter are problems of divisions and infighting among Christians, the issue of intellectual pride, carnality in the lives of professing believers, immorality, issues of marriage, divorce and singleness, issues related to proper and orderly worship, the certainty of an afterlife. All of these are contemporary in the experience of the 21st century church.

Here's how we are going to approach this study. There will be three things I hope to accomplish each week. First, what was the problem, the issue that Paul was addressing? Second, what was Paul's prescription to deal with the problem? We need to see both the problem and the prescription through the lens of first century life, being careful not to run these things through our 21st century lenses. After we do that, then we want to look for application. Where do we see similar problems and how does Paul's prescription fit within our time and culture today?

As I close, let me raise this question: How can you get the most out of this series? First of all, come each week with this prayer in mind" "Lord, help me to see what you have for me today. Help me understand your Word and how to apply to my life."

Second, engage with the text. Each week, try to read a chapter ahead – the general section we will be examining that next Sunday. And then I encourage you to engage with others in chewing on the text.