

Richard E. Davies, *St. Paul's Corinth: A Bible Reader's Guide*. Morrow, GA: Ina and Elsie Memorial Publications, 2010. \$15.

In 2 Cor 11:7, St. Paul asks, “Did I commit a sin by humbling myself?” According to Ronald Hock, Paul’s humbling refers to having to work with his hands. This humbling enabled him to preach the gospel free of charge. In 1 Cor 9 Paul boasts about serving the Corinthians without charge. It is a mark of distinction which sets him, along with Barnabas, off from other apostles. It is made possible at least partly by the fact that he works (vv 6, 18). Act 18:3 says that he, like Aquila and Priscilla were tent makers. In Paul’s mind, it enhances his authority. But in 2 Cor 11:7 Paul refers to it as “humbling” himself. His working has turned out to be an issue for the Corinthians, a source of offense, not of virtue. Why?

In his chapter “Tent Making and Other Low Class Jobs” (55-59), Richard Davies gathers evidence from various scholars and ancient sources that throw light on this puzzle. Generally, important people did not respect people who worked, no matter what they did. Working in cloth was an occupation that was so lowly that it normally disqualified a person from citizenship. The evidence that it was customary for a rabbi to have a trade is not found until 100 years after Paul’s lifetime. Besides the issue of respect, there was the issue of making enemies. By refusing money someone offered you, you were also refusing the obligation to support that person in any sort of controversy. In this way you were not only refusing “friendship” but courting the person’s enmity. Paul may have worked to support himself precisely because it freed him from obligation to one faction in the divided Corinthians congregation in opposition to another. Not an unknown problem today, in politics if not in the church! Davies also notes, however, that Paul was not alone in preferring working to living off of other people’s money. High profile writers including Plutarch, Lucian, and Epictetus counsel students to work rather than borrow, though their counsel was rarely heeded. This exploration of the ancient perspective on work is very clarifying for Americans whose view of work is very different, the prominence of very wealthy people who do not work in our society notwithstanding!

This is but a sample of the many particulars of Paul’s Corinthian correspondence that Davies clarifies by the fruits of his research. His general Introduction briefly recounts the destruction, rebuilding, and repopulation of Corinth over the course of the two centuries preceding Paul’s time. The question is, How much cultural continuity was there between the city before its destruction in 146 BCE and the new Roman colony founded and repopulated by Julius Caesar in 44 BCE? Are the religious myths we know about from sources before the destruction still alive in the minds of the new population? And just how new was it? Davies conclusion is that these myths continued to shape the intellectual world of the Corinthians in Paul’s time.

On the broadest level, the gods of these myths were self-focused and jealous and vengeful. They frequently created havoc in the lives of mortals who did not give them their due. Their view of sin included nothing in the realm of interpersonal relationship between mortals, like slander and haughtiness and ruthlessness. (215) They were not inclined to be forgiving. (213) The stories told by Jews about the God of Israel in the synagogues and by Paul the Jew in other settings as well, such as the market place, (58) was radically different from this reigning view of gods and mortals. It was no doubt refreshing to people whose view of reality had been shaped by the gods. (32)

On a more particular level, when people became Christians they did not automatically leave behind the culture of the city that nurtured them. One of the story themes of the culture was that of the young man who fell in love with his father’s new wife. While Paul declares that not

even the pagans would ever cross that boundary, we have an account of a young man lovesick over his father's wife. When the father learned what the problem was, he gave his wife to his son. The presence of these cultural themes rather than some idiosyncratic misbehavior could well have led to the relationship condemned by Paul in 1 Cor 5:1f.

Davis book is filled with investigations of the cultural background of such details, like the cultural practice of sacramental drunkenness (see 1 Cor 11:20-21; Davies 161ff), the widespread use of prostitutes for pleasure and wives for getting heirs (see 1 Cor 6:12-7:40; Davies, 101ff), and the fame of "Corinthians bronze" in the background of Paul's naming of "sounding brass" (KJV; *chalkos*, brass or bronze) as of no value without love in 1 Cor 13:1 (Davies, 61ff). The Table of Contents groups the specific topics under the headings Preliminary Considerations; The Business Climate; Tourism, Entertainment and Traditional Religion; The Cults Take Over; Intellectuals Want More than a Mystery, and A Troubled Congregation.

Preachers who have had a basic course in Paul's letters know that the letters contain only one side of a conversation that requires us to fill in the other side. A good bit of the time what we know of the ancient world in Paul's day allows for some widely different possibilities. In taking up social science issues, scholars have recently also been emphasizing the crucial importance of attending to what the how the recipients of Paul's letters may have responded to what he is saying from the perspective of their culture. Davies' book contributes significantly to the work of filling in the cultural background of the other side of the conversation. The combination of this focus on Corinthians culture, the wide spectrum of the matters he covers, and the detail with which he brings to each topic make this a unique commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians.

Davies states clearly that he writes as a scholar with credentials in communication theory, not as a Biblical scholar. True as that is, Davies exhibits excellent transferable skills. He also writes with a clear and enjoyable style. Reading it may do more than clarify the cultural background of details in Paul's letters to the Corinthians. It may also make contemporary preachers more attentive to the cultural background of those who are listening to our sermons. We might further use what Davies teaches us about Paul's listeners to help our own listeners to be attentive to how people of other cultures may be hearing us. Finally, the broadest theme of the Corinthian correspondence is Paul's call for attentiveness to others and to the health of the community in a culture more focused on the self, whether material self-indulgence or spiritual individualism and arrogance. (248) We and our listeners should not have much difficulty seeing these traits widely characterizing our own culture. Perhaps seeing them in others would help lead us to deeper insights about ourselves.

Adam Gilbert Bartholomew, Mount Vernon, NY