

Our Bodies, Christ's Body: Sexuality and Embodiment in 1 Corinthians

A Bible Study for Young Adults

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Purpose

This seven-session Bible study is directed to an audience of college students and other young adults. Its purpose is to help them consider issues of sexism, sexuality, and embodiment in their own lives and how the advice Paul gave to the Corinthians on these issues is relevant to them. By considering sexuality as the ground of all relationships, students can come to a deeper love for God and for other people.

Background

America's young adults live in a sexually charged world, and most of them are sexually active. A recent survey of 20,000 college students revealed that only 20% are virgins, and of those, only one third expect to remain virgins until they are married.* Discussing sexuality from a faith perspective is especially important for college students who may be away from home for the first time and are determining what values will guide their own lives, including their sexual behavior. In addition the study examines issues that are points of tension within the contemporary church and that students may encounter as future church leaders, namely homosexuality, divorce, and sexual misconduct.

1 Corinthians is uniquely suited to address these concerns. Although the book deals with a number of issues that divided the Corinthian church, themes of embodiment and sexuality run throughout — from questions the Corinthians posed about sexual behavior, food, head coverings, and the nature of the resurrected body, to the language Paul employs to describe the church as the body of Christ and the use of our own bodies in serving God, to discussion of the Eucharist, the sacrament of the body.

Approach

Using sociological, historical, and textual criticism, the study seeks to engage young adults in creative exploration of scripture and how it applies to their own lives. This context-driven approach takes a careful look at the social situation and at Greek words whose meanings might be unclear today. Discussion questions run throughout each session, urging participants to look for answers that are relevant to their lives.

Given college students' hectic schedules, long-term, intensive Bible studies are often not successful with this population. This study is therefore structured in seven one-hour sessions with no preparation required of the participants. The text of each session can be read by group members together or presented by the group leader.

The study does not cover the entire book of 1 Corinthians, but examines selected passages around weekly themes relating to sexuality and embodiment. While participants will benefit from attending all the sessions and will perceive some overarching themes of the book, each session is constructed in such a way that students can attend single sessions and not feel lost.

* Leland Elliott and Cynthia Brantley. *Sex on Campus: The Naked Truth about the Real Sex Lives of College Students*.

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SESSION ONE: INTRODUCTION – PAUL, THE CORINTHIANS, AND THE BODY

Opening Prayer

O Living Word, open our hearts and minds to your word for us today. Help us to hear the words that passed between Paul and the Corinthians and learn from them how we can better love you and each other. Amen.

Jumpstart

Reading Someone Else's Mail

Suppose someone hands you a letter and says, "Here – this was written about 2000 years ago to a church in Greece. It will answer questions you may have about dating, marriage, your body, and sexual stuff." What do you think? How would you feel if one of your letters was being read by people 2000 years from now?

Context: Paul and the Corinthians

Dating from about 54 C.E., 1 Corinthians is a letter from the apostle Paul to the church he had founded at Corinth several years earlier. The context of the letter is very different from our context today. As we read 1 Corinthians, we'll take a look at differences relating to social situations, use of language, theology, and cultural issues.

The City

To help understand the context of the letter, we look first at the city of Corinth. An ancient Greek city that was refounded as a Roman colony in 44 B.C.E., Corinth was a provincial capital, a manufacturing center, and home to

about 75,000 people. Corinth was located on a major trade route, and in addition to commercial traffic, the city drew people to its religious shrines and to a major athletic contest that was held there. The city was cosmopolitan, multi-racial, cross-cultural, and multi-religious and had long had a reputation for sexual promiscuity.

For more details about the city of Corinth, see the Appendix on page 8.

Discussion Questions

- ? How does Corinth remind you of any cities you know?
- ? What aspects of Corinth do you see in contemporary American society?
- ? Does Corinth sound like someplace you would like to visit? Why or why not?

The Church

In the midst of this bustling city, Paul founded a Christian community that included a cross-section of the Corinthian social world. Although some members were of a high social status, most were not. Paul writes that "not many were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Cor. 1: 26), and he notes that some of the members were domestic slaves (1 Cor. 7:21). As we'll see, this disparity of status among church members created problems for the community. Other problems stemmed from the religious and ethnic diversity within the church. Among the church members were former Jews and former Gentiles, who Paul describes as the circumcised and the uncircumcised (1 Cor. 7:18).

The early Christian church existed as a marginal group within Roman society, seeking to live by a new set of values and beliefs. In addition to the conflicts within the

community, there were tensions between the Corinthians and the larger society that worshiped a number of Roman gods. Much of Paul's writings try to strengthen the Corinthians' faith in one God and to encourage their resistance to the idol worship that was all around them.

The Apostle

Paul established the Corinthian church during an 18-month visit in the early 50s C.E. He remained in close contact with the church over the next few years, and references within 1 and 2 Corinthians indicate that Paul and church members wrote to each other several times. In fact "first" Corinthians is probably not the first letter, and "second" Corinthians contains parts of at least two different letters. This ongoing correspondence is outlined below and indicates that, despite difficulties, Paul and the church remained close.

- Paul visits Corinth and establishes the church (Acts 18:11)
- Paul writes to Corinthians (letter is lost, mentioned in 1 Cor. 5:9)
- Corinthians write Paul with ethical questions (1 Cor. 7:1)
- Paul writes letter known as 1 Corinthians
- Paul sends Timothy to Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17)
- Paul makes a "painful" visit to Corinth (2 Cor. 2:1)
- Paul writes angry letter (part of 2 Cor.)
- Titus visits Corinth to help make peace (2 Cor. 8:17)
- Paul writes letter of reconciliation (part of 2 Cor.)

Exercise

Hide and Seek

Notice in 1 Corinthians 4:14-15 that Paul refers to himself as the Corinthians' father. Now read 1 Corinthians 3:1-15 to yourself and find three other metaphors Paul uses to describe his relationship with the Corinthian church. Raise your hand when you've found all three.

Paul and the Body

First-Century Views

First Corinthians deals with a number of issues over which the members of the Corinthian church disagreed: rival groups seeking control, various immoralities, appropriate Christian conduct, and even Paul's authority over them. Although sexuality is not the only thing discussed in the letter, it is related to a number of the issues Paul addresses, and he uses the image of the body – specifically the body of Christ – to call for unity among church members.

In order to understand the issues of embodiment and sexuality that are discussed in 1 Corinthians, we need to look at Greco-Roman views of the body in the first century. Some people – especially those who were influenced by Plato – saw the body and soul as two separate, distinct elements. But most folks thought the body was a commingling of many different elements that had to be kept in proper balance. There was a hierarchy of body parts, with the head or the mind governing the rest of the body. The various characteristics of the human body were on a hierarchical continuum:

Best	Worst
male	female
light skin	dark skin
cool	warm
dry	moist
hard	soft
thin	fat

Many people agreed with Aristotle's theory that women were incomplete males who did not have proper conditions in womb (cool and dry) to develop into males.

The perfect body was one that was perfectly balanced, and a strong, beautiful body was thought to reflect noble character. The body was a frequent metaphor for society: Just as the parts of the body had to be in balance, so there should be balance and harmony among members of society.

Discussion Questions

- ? How is this view similar to views of the body today? How is it different?
- ? Look through fashion and news magazines to see what type of bodies our society values. What is the message for those who don't see that image when they look in the mirror?

It's Greek to Me

Soma (SOE-mah) = body

Paul uses the word *soma* 44 times in 1 Corinthians to refer to the following:

- proper and improper use of the human body (6:12-20)
- enduring bodily hardship or sacrifice for God (9:27, 13:3)
- Eucharist bread as the body of Christ (10:16-17, 11:24-29)
- the church as the body of Christ compared to the human body (12:12-27)
- the earthly, physical body compared to the spiritual body after resurrection (15:35-44)

Paul's writings show a certain ambivalence about the human body. On the one hand, he embraced the positive view of creation and earthly things that is part of the Jewish worldview from which he came. Yet he was also influenced by Plato's dualistic thought and by the patriarchal times in which he lived, so he often sounds as if he sees the spirit as being separate and more important than the body.

Paul discusses a number of issues concerning embodiment in 1 Corinthians, such as:

- sexuality immorality (5:1-13)
- marital relations (7:1-16)
- eating and food (8:1-13, 11:17-34)
- athletic discipline (9:24-25)
- head coverings and hair styles (11:2-16)

Whether you agree with Paul's views of the body or not, it is clear that embodiment is a very important concept for him. One theologian suggests, in fact, that the idea of the body, *soma*, is the cornerstone of Paul's theology:

*"It is from the body of sin and death
that we are delivered;
it is through the body of Christ on the cross
that we are saved;
it is into his body the church
that we are incorporated;
it is by his body in the Eucharist
that this community is sustained;
it is in our body
that its new life has to be manifested;
it is to a resurrection of this body to the
likeness of his glorious body
that we are destined."*

—John A. T. Robinson, from *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology**

* quoted in James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*, pg. 50.

What Does it Mean for Us?

How does this letter to Christians 2000 years ago relate to young adults today? What common ground do we have with these early believers? Consider the following questions together.

? The Corinthian church is a small community within larger society, just as the college or university you attend is part of a larger society. You may be part of a campus ministry group that is an even smaller group within the larger campus setting. How are these groups like the Corinthian church? What pressures do you feel from the larger campus community? From society as a whole?

? In what ways do issues of embodiment affect society today? Looking at the list of issues that Paul discusses in this letter (see above), which of those are we still dealing with and in what ways?

? Do you think about the body in light of your faith? When you read Robinson's quote about how important the body was to Paul's theology, does it seem strange to think of your beliefs that way?

Closing

Close the group session with prayer for this time of study together, including any issues of praise or concern that group members want to share. Then sing together the first verse of "They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love."

We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
And we pray that our unity
May one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians
By our love, by our love,
Yes they'll know we are Christians
By our love.

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.

SESSION TWO : EMBODIMENT – YOUR BODY, GOD’S TEMPLE

Opening Prayer

Creator God, help us through our study together to befriend our own bodies and to see them as part of your good creation. Help us know how to use them to your glory and to build up your church on earth. Amen.

Jumpstart

Name one thing you do without using any part of your body.

Embodiment Theology

Our bodies are involved in everything we do. While we tend to think of them as separate from who we really are, our bodies shape how we perceive the world, because everything comes to us through our senses and is processed by our brain, all of which are body parts. Our bodies are also what connect us to other humans and to all living creatures — every living thing has a body.

Over the years, our bodies have gotten a bad rap, especially from the church. We see them as something that distracts us from our true experience of God, which comes through spiritual channels. In recent decades, some theologians have tried to describe just how important our bodies are to our faith. Many believe that our embodiment and sexuality are the very qualities that allow us to form relationships with each other and with God. The importance of the body to our Christian faith is affirmed in the fact that God took bodily form in Jesus, and in the image of the church as the body of Christ.

Read through the following quotes and discuss them together.

“Sexuality is our self-understanding and way of being in the world as male and female. . . . The mystery of our sexuality is the mystery of our need to reach out to embrace others both physically and spiritually. Sexuality thus expresses God’s intention that we find our authentic humanness in relationship. But such humanizing relationship cannot occur on the human dimension alone. Sexuality, we must also say, is intrinsic to our relationship with God. . . . Sexuality involves much more than what we do with our genitals. More fundamentally, it is who we are as body-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion — human and divine.”
— James Nelson,
from *Embodiment*, pp. 17-18

“Christianity, understood not primarily as a nexus of ideas but as concrete participation in a body — the ‘body of Christ’ — provides a strong formulation of the centrality and significance of physical existence, in which human life itself is understood as given in physical existence — creation — and fulfilled only in physical existence — resurrection of the body.”
— Margaret Miles,
from *Image as Insight*, p. 36

Discussion Questions

- ?How long do you think these ideas have been around?
- ?On what points do you agree or disagree with the authors’ ideas?

A Temple of God

Read aloud 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 and discuss the following questions.

? How does it make you feel to think of your body as a member of Christ's body?

? How often do you think of your body as belonging to God? How does that affect what you do with or to your body?

Exercise

Warning! Danger Ahead

Read the following warnings aloud.

- "Warning: The Surgeon General has determined that smoking can be hazardous to your health."

- "This is your brain. This is your brain on drugs. Any questions?"

- "Diets low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of heart disease."

- "Using condoms correctly every time you have sex reduces the risk of HIV infection."

? Can you think of other warnings that we hear everyday?

? How much do we really hear them, and how much do they blend into the background?

? How much do such warnings make you think about what goes into your body?

Purity and Danger

People in the ancient world were very concerned with purity. Since they saw the body as a commingling of elements,

they believed it could be endangered by external pollutants or by internal imbalance. It became very important to guard against any impurities. The Jewish law, detailed in the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, defined what was clean, or pure, and what was unclean.

We are not as aware of notions of purity in our own culture, but they are present. Sometimes cleanliness is related to something being in the right place: coffee in the cup is clean; coffee on your sweater is dirt. Purity also affects what we eat. We think nothing of eating cows, pigs, or chickens, but most Americans would be revolted by the idea of eating horses, dogs, or cats. First-century Jews had equally strong notions of purity, which were spelled out in Levitical law.

Much of the conflict in the Corinthian church came from the fact that some of the members came out of this Jewish heritage with strict purity laws, while others were Gentiles with no such restrictions. Paul addresses several issues that relate to food and meal etiquette — what we eat and how it goes into our bodies. Of special concern was whether Christians should eat meat from animals that had been sacrificed to Roman idols, which would have been available for purchase in local markets.

Another point of conflict for the Corinthians related to fellowship meals. When early Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper, they really celebrated — apparently with a full meal in which everyone brought food to share, much like our potluck meals. This was very much in keeping with the Jewish meal tradition and with Jesus' practice of eating and drinking with his friends, and of feeding those who were hungry. The Corinthians, though, seem to have lost the sense of communal sharing.

Exercise

You Are What You Eat

Divide the class into three groups and have each group look at one of the following passages. Discuss the questions within your group, then share briefly with the whole class.

- 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (whether to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols)
- 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 (idolatry versus the Eucharist)
- 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 (abuses at the Eucharist)

? What does this passage suggest about how our body is affected by what we eat?

? What issues of purity are at stake here?

? What are some ways this passage relates to our food and meal choices today?

What Does it Mean for Us?

We have a different understanding of our bodies than the early Christians had. We tend to think our bodies belong to us and we can do whatever we want to with them. But in fact, we don't have bodies, we are bodies. Our bodies are not a separate possession, but they are who we are — and we belong to God.

? How does your body image change if you see your body through God's eyes instead of society's?

? What kind of emphasis does our society place on food and eating? What is the effect of being constantly bombarded by ads for food and ads for weight loss programs?

? Think of the prevalence of eating disorders in our culture. Think of people you know people who use food as a crutch or as a substitute for God. What is the difference in going out for ice cream to celebrate doing well on a test versus going home and eating a pint of Ben and Jerry's triple fudge because you did lousy on a test?

? Compare Paul's discussion of eating idol meat in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 to reasons people might have for not eating meat today.

Closing

Close the group session with prayer for this time of study together, including any issues of praise or concern that group members want to share. Then sing together the first verse of "They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love."

We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
And we pray that our unity
May one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians
By our love, by our love,
Yes they'll know we are Christians
By our love.

SESSION THREE: SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

Opening Prayer

Loving God, guide us this week as we try to understand how our sexual behavior affects you and other people. Show us through your Word how to keep from hurting each other and how to be faithful stewards of your gift of sexuality. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Jumpstart

An Inventory of Sexual Morals

Rate the sexual activities on the chart below based on your own morals. This is not a test, but it should help you figure out how you feel about sexual issues. Please be honest – you do not have to share this with anyone else, although you may if you want to.

Activity	A bad thing	Sort of a bad thing	Neutral or mixed feelings	An okay thing	A good thing
Masturbation					
Oral sex outside of marriage					
Manual genital stimulation of another person outside of marriage					
An individual or a couple privately viewing adult pornography					
An individual or a couple privately viewing child pornography					
Sexual intercourse by two unmarried persons					
Adultery					
Married person having sex with a prostitute					
Unmarried person having sex with a prostitute					
Same-sex sexual interaction within a committed relationship					
Same-sex sexual interaction outside of a committed relationship					

Discussion Questions

- ? Do you find it hard to think about these things? Talk about them? Why or why not?
- ? How is your view of these actions affected by whether someone else is hurt by them?
- ? How much are your views shaped by your family? Society? The church? The Bible?

It's Greek to Me

porneia (por-NAY-a) = illicit sexual intercourse

As used by Paul and other Christian writers, *porneia* may have several different meanings so it may be translated differently, depending on the context. *Porneia* can mean sexual relations:

- between unmarried persons (in this case it is usually translated as “fornication” or “unchastity”)
- for profit (here it is translated as “prostitution” or “harlotry”)
- outside the bonds of marriage (then it is translated “immorality” — there is another word for adultery).

Porneia can also be used figuratively to describe the worship of idols, or the defilement that comes with eating meat sacrificed to idols (we considered this issue in Session Two).

Paul' View of Sexual Misconduct

Sexuality is powerful stuff. It can make us feel incredibly close to another person and even reflect our closeness to God. At the same time sexuality can be used to hurt or abuse other people, just as we sometimes hurt God. In the book of Hosea, God tells the prophet to marry a prostitute and then orders him to take her back when she has cheated on him. In the same way, God continues to love the people of Israel (and us!), even when they betray and offend God. We might define sexual misconduct, then, as a misuse of God's gift of sexuality that hurts another person and/or offends God.

Apparently the Corinthians were having trouble deciding what counted as sexual misconduct because Paul addresses several specific situations in

his letter to them. In reading these passages, remember that sexual immorality in the ancient world was almost always defined as a violation of someone's property (and property could mean their wife, their daughter, or their own body) OR it was about purity and cleanliness. This fits with the definition of sexual immorality in the previous paragraph: taking someone else's property hurts them, and impurity was believed to be an offense to God. See if you can detect Paul's understanding of sexual immorality as you read the following passages from 1 Corinthians.

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-5

Paul addresses a situation in which a member of the Corinthian church is living with his father's wife. However, it's not clear if the father is still in the picture or if he has died. The word *porneia* shows up in verse 1: “It is actually reported that there is *porneia* among you.” In addition to the other meanings of the word, this situation also suggests something kind of kinky. Paul doesn't use the word incest, but a relationship between a man and his stepmother was forbidden by the Jewish holiness code that defines the boundaries of incest (Leviticus 18:8) and was also considered incest by Roman law.

Discussion Questions

- ? If the group is using different translations of the Bible, compare the different ways *porneia* is translated in verse 1. What do you think the word means in this passage?
- ? Who is being hurt in this situation?
- ? What does Paul seem to be more upset about – the way the man has sinned, or the fact that the community allowed it to happen?

2 The meaning of verse 5 is unclear, but probably means that the man should be kicked out of the church. If that's what Paul means, how fair do you think his judgment is? What else might this verse mean? How would you handle the situation?

Read 1 Corinthians 5:9-13, 6:9-11

Paul offers two lists of the kinds of sinners the Corinthians should avoid in order to keep from disrupting the community. In chapter 5, he warns against immorality among members of the community, contrasting that with the immorality found in the "outside world." In chapter 6 he addresses lawsuits

Corinthians were filing against each other in the Roman courts and urges them to settle disputes among themselves. In 6:9-11, he lists several sinful acts, noting that some of the Corinthians themselves did these things before they became Christians. His reference to baptism in verse 11 relates to sexual immorality in two ways: first because baptism is supposed to wash away our sins, and second because it makes us part of the Christian community, where our actions will affect other people.

The lists in chapters 5 and 6 name similar sins and most of them correspond to Jewish laws in Deuteronomy. Here's how they match up:

References in 1 Corinthians 5:9-13	References in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11	References in Deuteronomy
Sexually immoral – <i>porneia</i> (5:9, 10, 11)	Fornicators – <i>porneia</i> (6:9) Adulterers – <i>moicheia</i> (6:9)	Promiscuity, adultery (22:21-22, 30)
Greedy (5:10, 11)	Greedy (6:10)	No real match
Robber (5:10, 11)	Thieves (6:10) Robbers (6:10)	Kidnapping, slave-trading (24:7)
Idolater (5:10, 11)	Idolaters (6:9)	Idolatry (13:1-5; 17:2-7)
Reviler (5:11)	Revilers (6:10)	Malicious false testimony (19:16-19)
Drunkard (5:11)	Drunkards (6:10)	Rebellious drunken son (21:18-21)

A Note on Homosexuality

1 Corinthians 6:9 lists two additional sins that are not included in chapter 5: *malakoi* (often translated "male prostitutes") and *arsenokoitai* (often translated "sodomites"). These verses have often been used to condemn the practice of homosexuality. (The Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates the two words together in verse 9 as "homosexuals.") As you consider these passages, though, you should keep some things in mind. First, the meaning of the Greek terms is unclear. *Malakoi* means "soft," and, depending on the context, it could refer to masturbation, the passive member of male

same-sex intercourse, being effeminate (which is how the King James Version translates it in 6:9), male prostitution, or any man who is not respectable. Likewise *arsenokoitai* is never used in a context that makes its meaning clear. If your study group is using different translations, compare the various ways these terms are translated. Whatever the meaning of the two terms, it is important to remember that Paul and other ancient writers had no concept of homosexual or bisexual orientation, which is becoming a more common way to understand sexuality today. Because the ancient world assumed that everyone was heterosexual, any same-sex behavior was considered unnatural. These warnings may also refer to temple prostitution, a practice in some pagan rituals that involved orgiastic sexual encounters with male or female prostitutes, or even young boys. Corinth was one of the cities in which this occurred, and Paul would have been appalled by such sacrilege.

Discussion Questions

- ? Do you think Paul is addressing issues of property or purity in these two lists?
- ? How often do you encounter these problems within your community? How do you deal with it?
- ? What does it mean to say church members have been “washed . . . sanctified . . . justified” by Christ (6:11)? How should being baptized make a difference in the way we act?

Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-8, 14

In chapter 10, Paul tells the Corinthians to learn from the past and not make the same mistakes the Israelites did.

Background Check: Take a look at Numbers 25:1-9 where the Israelites assume a plague that struck them was God’s punishment for Israelite men having sex with foreign women and worshiping their gods.

Recalling the traditional link between idolatry and sexual immorality (*porneia*), Paul warns that the ancient Israelites weren’t the only ones who faced such temptation. Paul realized that the Corinthian Christians were easily tempted by the pagan culture that

surrounded them, including idol worship and the temple prostitution that often accompanied it. Because sexuality can be so powerful, believers may have been tempted to reject God in favor of the gods their lovers worshiped or to make sex itself an idol.

Discussion Questions

- ? How strongly does this passage seem to condemn sexual immorality and in what circumstances?
- ? How do you feel about the belief that God punishes us for our sins with disease or other misfortune?
- ? How would you explain the connection between sex and idolatry in the ancient world? In our world today?

What Does it Mean for Us?

We have looked at several different passages that talk about sexual immorality and how it relates to the larger community, other sins, and idolatry. Think now about the sexual world that we face today and whether these issues are still important. Think about how we might hurt others by violating or taking their “property,” how our actions could disrupt our community, and how our

society idolizes sex. Look at the following questions together.

? Looking back at the sexual inventory in the Jumpstart, how do Paul's comments affect your view of these activities?

? How much do you consider whether your sexual choices violate someone else's property? What might property mean in today's context?

? In determining your own sexual behavior, how often do you consider the effect your actions might have on your friends and others in your community?

? What are some of the ways that our society idolizes sex?

Closing

Close the group session with prayer for this time of study together, including any issues of praise or concern that group members want to share. Then sing together the first verse of "They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love."

We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
And we pray that our unity
May one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians
By our love, by our love,
Yes they'll know we are Christians
By our love.

SESSION FOUR: SEXISM – MALE/FEMALE RELATIONS

Opening Prayer

Creator God, you have made us in your image – male and female you created us and called us good. Teach us to respect our own gender and that of our loved ones and friends. Amen.

Jumpstart

If possible, view a scene from the movie *The Apostle*, in which the evangelical preacher, Sonny, arrives at his son's softball game, strikes his wife's lover with a baseball bat, then grabs his wife by the hair and drags her and the kids away. Discuss how a minister might think such actions are justified by scripture.

Some Infamous Passages

Consider the following passages together:

- “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does.” (1 Cor. 7:4a)
- “Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife.” (1 Cor. 11:3)
- “For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man.” (1 Cor. 11:7)
- “Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says.” (1 Cor. 14:34)

Discussion Questions

? Looking only at these statements, how would you describe Paul's view of women? Of the proper relationship between men and women?

Read in isolation, these passages may seem more sexist than they really are. Paul held a fairly liberal view of women, noting in Galatians 3:28 that distinctions such as male and female are dissolved by our oneness in Christ. Women are mentioned among church leaders in Romans (16:1-15) and Philippians (4:2-3), and Acts refers to Paul's visit to the Philippian church, where he met with a gathering of women only (16:13).

Two important factors shape Paul's view of women and male/female relations. First is the freedom in Christ that was available to both women and men. In this patriarchal society, there were few places where women were treated as men's equals, yet Christ's liberating love is offered to all people. Second, Paul's advice on appropriate relations between the sexes was affected by his belief that the end times were near – a time when the risen Christ would return and human life would be completely transformed. These passages reveal specific advice Paul based on that assumption.

While according women a new freedom in Christ, Paul also encouraged a sense of order for the good of the whole community. At a time when men were the traditional heads of household, Paul urged Corinthian families to keep order within the family under the man as its head, just as the church submits to Christ as its head. Later epistles use even stronger language (Ephesians 5:21-24 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15). Although written in Paul's name, these later epistles were probably not by him. They deal with order in the church and in families that began to be a problem as church communities grew in size.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-16, 25-38

Paul allows for sexual relations in marriage mostly out of concern for self-control (vv. 2, 5, 9), and he suggests that married couples observe periods of celibacy, unless it would tempt them to sexual immorality (*porneia*, v. 2). His clear preference for singleness runs counter to the value placed on family at that time. He even urges widows to remain unmarried (vv. 8-9) in a patriarchal society where women needed to be under male protection.

Here Paul's advice reflects his belief that Christ would return within most people's lifetime; his suggestions were meant as temporary measures until Christ's second coming (vv. 26, 29, 31). Building up the community through marriage and having children was far less important than making sure your soul was right with God — a need that Christians of both sexes shared. Paul's advice to married partners relates less to gender roles and more to his view that the present world order was to end soon. Paul believed Christians should be single and celibate, or married and sexually active, whichever they would find less of a distraction.

Paul does suggest that marriage partners share equally in certain areas. In another radical departure from the patriarchal notions of his time, he calls for mutual submission within marriage, noting that both wife and husband have authority over the other's body. And he writes that either a wife or husband may provide the means by which a non-believing spouse comes to know Christ, again indicating the mutual importance of both spouses.

Discussion Questions

- ? How relevant are Paul's notions of celibacy to Christians today? What are the arguments for celibacy today?
- ? How would you like being in a marriage with the kind of mutuality Paul describes?

It's Greek to Me

kefale (kef-al-AY) = head

Metaphorically, *kefale* refers to anything supreme or prominent. In some cases it means "source." Paul uses the word 10 times in 1 Corinthians 11.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Paul is apparently responding to questions or concerns about women being veiled in church, and he bases his argument on the idea that man is the head of woman, just as Christ is the head of man.

Background Check: Did you know that there two different versions of the creation story in Genesis? Compare how each describes the creation of humans by taking a look at Genesis 1:26-27, and Genesis 2:18, 21-23.

Paul ignores the first creation story, in which both men and women are made in God's image. Instead, reflecting his concern for order within the community, Paul writes that only man reflects the image of God (v. 7) and notes that woman was created from man and for man (vv. 8-9). He does, however, try to even the score by saying that man comes through woman in birth (v. 12). In the end, though, it is all relative, since everything comes from God.

Scholars are not clear about some points of Paul's argument, especially the reference to angels (v. 10), and what some of the veiling customs might have been. He does seem to be saying that although men and women have equality in Christ, the Corinthians should still honor gender distinctions — distinctions that preserve patriarchal ideas.

Discussion Questions

- ? In terms of fairness to both sexes, how does this passage compare with Paul's comments on marriage in the previous passage?
- ? How important do you think gender distinctions such as hairstyles and clothing are to us today?

Read 1 Corinthians 14:34-36

This passage is often cited by churches that do not ordain women. However, the argument here is inconsistent with what Paul writes elsewhere. First, in the passage we just considered (1 Cor. 11:5), Paul says women should cover their heads when they pray or prophesy, so obviously women did speak in the Corinthian church. Second, Paul appeals to the law, although he writes elsewhere that we are freed from the law by Christ (Romans 7:6, 1 Cor. 7:18-19). Scholars offer the following possible interpretations:

- In verses 34-35 Paul is quoting from the Corinthians, and in verse 36 he is disagreeing with them.
- The passage prohibits a certain kind of speech that was common in this church, but not all speech.
- The passage applies to married women only, for they could consult their husbands at home.
- The passage reveals concerns of the later epistles and was probably added by

someone else — in fact the NRSV Bible puts these verses in parentheses.

Discussion Questions

- ? What do think is the best interpretation of this passage?
- ? Does this passage seem out of character for Paul? Why or why not?
- ? How do you reconcile this passage with the fact that women are ordained by most Protestant denominations?

What Does it Mean for Us?

Paul's advice on relations between the sexes is based largely in Christians' new-found freedom in Christ and in the tension of waiting for the end times. In many places today, women still do not enjoy equal opportunities, and although we may not be looking for Christ to return any day now, we should try to live as if we are. Divide into small groups of all males or all females. Talk about the following questions with each other, then share them with the whole group.

- ? How relevant do you find Paul's advice to your gender?
- ? Discuss how often men think about sex versus how often women do. Who do you think finds it more of a distraction? Why? How does such a distraction affect your faith?
- ? How do you see relations between the sexes? How different are things now than they seemed to be in Paul's day?

Consider the following question with the whole group:

- ? How can Paul's advice affect how you relate to the opposite sex?

Closing

Close the group session with prayer for this time of study together, including any issues of praise or concern that group members want to share. Then sing together the first verse of “They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love.”

We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
And we pray that our unity
May one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians
By our love, by our love,
Yes they'll know we are Christians
By our love.

SESSION FIVE: THE BODY OF CHRIST

Opening Prayer

Incarnate God, you loved humanity enough to take on a human body. We are now your body on earth. Show us how to live as your body in our own lives and in the ways we treat others. Amen.

Jumpstart

Close your eyes: What do you see when you hear the phrase: “the body of Christ”? What does that image say about the church? About us as Christians?

One Body in Christ

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul talks about the Corinthian community as a body and introduces the metaphor of the body of Christ, an important part of the church’s identity yet today. There are two parts to this metaphor: First, Paul discusses the gifts that each person brings to the body, stressing the value of the individual members. Second, he describes how the parts of the body depend on one another and how each is crucial to the well being of the entire body. The image of the body of Christ implies both diversity and unity.

It’s Greek to Me

charisma (*KAR-is-ma*) = a gift freely bestowed

Paul uses this word in Chapter 12 to talk about special gifts the Corinthians have received from God. The word is closely related to the Greek word *charis*, or grace, which Paul uses throughout the letter to refer to God’s gift of grace and his own feelings of gratitude.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Paul writes here of the spiritual gifts Christians have received from God. These are not special talents the individual has cultivated and can boast about. Instead, these gifts are given by God to be used for the good of the church, not for personal triumph.

In defining the variety of gifts within the community, Paul stresses that these gifts come from one and the same God (vv. 4, 5, 6, 7, 11). All are given by God to be used for God’s glory. The term “spiritual gifts,” then, does not necessarily mean these gifts are spiritual in nature, but that they are from the Spirit. Paul lists several such gifts as examples (vv. 8-10):

- utterance of wisdom
- utterance of knowledge
- faith
- gifts of healing
- working of miracles
- prophecy
- discernment of spirits
- various kinds of tongues
- interpretation of tongues

Think of the gifts God has given you. Remember that naming our God-given gifts is not bragging but is necessary to be in full service to God’s church.

Discussion Questions

? Do you identify with any of the spiritual gifts Paul mentions? Which ones do you find present in your own faith community? Which ones are missing?

? What are your own gifts? How have you identified those gifts? How do you use them to glorify God?

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

The second part of Paul's image of the body of Christ stresses the unity of the body. As we saw in Session One, it was common in the ancient world to compare society to a human body. Paul takes that image and applies it to the church, noting clearly in verses 12-13 that we are one body, baptized by the one Spirit, as sing each week in our closing song. He returns to the issue of diversity in verses 14-26, noting that all parts of the body are important, not in and of themselves, but for what they bring to the whole body. In fact, he writes, the parts that seem to be the weakest are indispensable (v. 22); the less honorable deserve the most honor; the less respectable, the most respect (v. 23). And the parts of the body are so interconnected that when one member suffers, the whole body does.

Discussion Questions

- ? What parts of the body might Paul be referring to when he talks about the weaker members? The less respectable members? What people in the community could he be speaking about?
- ? What parts of the body can we not live without? In what ways are some members of a community more essential than others?

Think About It

Two medieval mystics wrote about our individual identity as Christ's body, departing from Paul's emphasis on the corporate body. Read these silently and reflect on your body as Christ's body.

*"We awaken in Christ's body
as Christ awakens our bodies,
and my poor hand is Christ, He enters
my foot, and is infinitely me.*

*I move my hand, and wonderfully
my hand becomes Christ, becomes all
of Him (for God is indivisibly
whole, seamless in His Godhood).*

*I move my foot, and at once
He appears like a flash of lightning.
Do my words seem blasphemous?—
Then open your heart to him*

*and let yourself receive the one
who is opening to you so deeply.
For if we genuinely love Him
we wake up in Christ's body*

*where all our body, all over,
every most hidden part of it,
is realized in joy as Him
and He makes us, utterly, real,*

*and everything that is hurt, everything
that seemed to us dark, harsh,
shameful, maimed, ugly, irreparably
damaged, is in Him transformed*

*and recognized as whole, as lovely,
and radiant in His light
we awaken as the beloved
in every last part of our body."*
— Symeon the New Theologian¹

*"Christ has no body now on earth
but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours;
yours are the eyes through which to look
at Christ's compassion to the world,
yours are the feet with which
he is to go about doing good,
and yours are the hands
with which he is to bless us now."*
— Teresa of Avila²

¹ Quoted in Jane Vennard: *Praying with Body and Soul: A Way to Intimacy with God*, pp. 120-21.

² From *The Doubleday Prayer Collection*, edited by Mary Batchelor, p. 269.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:27-31, 14:1-5

After stressing the unity of the body and the significance of all its parts, Paul points out that some gifts are more important than others. In 12:28, he ranks gifts in the following order:

- apostles
- prophets
- teachers
- deeds of power
- gifts of healing
- forms of assistance
- forms of leadership
- various kinds of tongues

In chapter 14, Paul clearly states that prophecy is more important than speaking in tongues, a form of ecstatic utterance that is unintelligible to hearers. Since this letter deals with various conflicts among the Corinthians, Paul may be addressing a conflict over the relative value of these two gifts. The key for Paul is communication. Prophecy is more important because it addresses other people and builds up the church. Only God can understand those who speak in tongues, unless there is someone to translate for the rest of the community. You might want to read the rest of chapter 14, in which Paul elaborates on the distinction between these two gifts and compares speaking in tongues to playing an instrument without following any notes (v. 7).

Discussion Questions

❓ Look at the way Paul ranks gifts in 12:28. How do you think we would prioritize these gifts in our churches today? Are there other gifts that are more important to the church now?

❓ What do you think of Paul's argument that prophecy is more important than speaking in tongues?

❓ How important is communication within the church? What problems do generational differences pose for the church today?

Exercise

Trust

Acknowledging that we are all part of one body requires that we trust each other, just as you can usually trust your own body to do the things you need it to do. Try these two trust exercises.

1. Trust Yourself

Stand with your legs 2-3 feet apart (some may want to try this on their knees instead of standing). Extend your arms, shoulder height, straight out to each side. Turn your head to look at your right hand. Bend to the left at the waist, bending your left knee if necessary, and reach down to touch the ground with your left hand, while still looking at your right hand. If you aren't flexible enough to reach the floor, grab your ankle or your calf. Hold for 10-15 seconds then release.

2. Trust Each Other

Stand in a circle, with one member of the group in the center. With eyes closed and arms folded across his or her chest, the center person falls in one direction, trusting that the others will catch him or her. Let two or three people try this.

❓ How difficult was it for you to trust your own body? To trust each other? Which was harder for you?

What Does it Mean for Us?

With our society's emphasis on individualism and distorted body images, it may be hard for us to understand the body of Christ image in the way the Corinthians did. We find it difficult to admit that we are dependent on others, so the idea of being members of one body runs counter to fundamental American values like independence and individuality. We see bodies and sexual imagery around us everyday, but we may have trouble loving our own bodies, which never seem as perfect as those we see in mass media. These ideas can be barriers to our ability to really accept and live out the belief that we are the body of Christ. With those barriers in mind, consider these questions together.

? Discuss some of the ways societies or churches are like a body. What are the positive aspects? The negative?

? How does the sacrament of the Eucharist support the notion of the church as the body of Christ?

? How do popular images of "perfect bodies" affect how we see ourselves as the body of Christ?

? Do all members of a human community contribute equally? Should people be valued based on what they contribute?

? Think about your own faith community, who is part of it and what is stressed in preaching and study groups. Which aspect of the body image seems more important in your church — diversity of gifts or unity in the Spirit? How can churches find a good balance between those two?

? How far does the body of Christ extend? To your local congregation? Your denomination? All Christians? All people? Does the image have a different meaning depending on how far you extend it?

Closing

Close the group session with prayer for this time of study together, including any issues of praise or concern that group members want to share. Then sing together the first verse of "They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love."

We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
And we pray that our unity
May one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians
By our love, by our love,
Yes they'll know we are Christians
By our love

SESSION SIX: SEX AND LOVE

Opening Prayer

Great God of Love, we thank you for blessing us with your love that is shown most fully in the life and death of your son Jesus. Show us how Christ's love can guide us in our relationships with each other and deepen our love for you. Amen.

Jumpstart

Before reading what Paul has to say about love, think about what love means to you. Talk about it together, and write down some qualities or descriptions of love on a board or tablet that everyone can see.

It's About Love

The thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians is often read at weddings, so it may be familiar. The passage is as famous for its poetic qualities as for what it says. Paul's use of metaphors and rhythm is so powerful that we may remember phrases without really thinking about what they mean. And because of its association with weddings, we may think Paul is talking about romantic love — complete with kisses, flowers, and puffy dresses. But Paul is not describing some sweet, sappy love that makes us feel butterflies in our stomachs. Instead Paul writes of a vigorous, active love rooted in God's love for us — love that is strong enough to heal deep divisions in a community. This is love with some teeth.

It's Greek to Me

agape (ag-AH-pay) = love, charity

philia (fil-EE-ah) = friendship

eros (EH-ros) = passion

The word used for “love” in 90% of scripture (including 1 Corinthians 13) is *agape* (verb form *agapao*). *Eros* is not used at all in the Bible, although a comparable Hebrew word is used in the Song of Solomon. *Philia* suggests affection or fondness and can relate to either people or things. It is used several times in the Christian scriptures, including a warning in 1 Timothy 6:10 about the love of money (*philarguria*) and comments about the love Christians should have for one another (*philadelphia*). Second Peter 1:5-7 offers a “ladder” of virtues that starts with faith, leads to mutual affection (*philadelphia*), and ends, finally, with love (*agape*).

Agape is a gift from God — a gift that, with faith and hope, is necessary for salvation. These are sometimes referred to as universal gifts, since they are given to all Christians, unlike the spiritual gifts we discussed in Session Five. God's love for us is *agape*: Jesus didn't die because he was fond of us, but because of the depth of divine love. And because God loves us so much, we must love each other. *Agape* is not just something you feel, it's something you do. Consider these passages from scripture that deal with *agape*:

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”

— John 15:9-10

"[Jesus] said: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

— Matthew 22:37-39

"I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you."

— Luke 6:27

"I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

— Romans 8:38-39

Discussion Questions

? Based on these passages, what words would you use to describe *agape*? Add these to the list from the Jumpstart exercise.

The Greatest of These

The thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians is an extended discourse in praise of *agape*, which is translated as either "love" or "charity." The chapter is in three clear sections, which we'll look at separately.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

This section could be summarized as: "If you have everything else but don't have love, the other stuff isn't worth much." Paul describes several spiritual gifts, which are also mentioned in chapter 12 and/or 14: speaking in tongues, prophesying, having miraculous faith, and self-sacrifice. In contrast to the special gifts, love is a universal gift,

necessary for salvation. *Agape* is the spirit in which other gifts should be used. *Agape* should inform everything we do so that whenever we start something new, we should be able to say "I'm doing this out of love."

Paul writes in first person, which accomplishes two things: First it makes his own ministry an example that would mean nothing if he didn't do it out of love. Second, he makes this chapter very personal as well as universal. In the next section, he makes sure that the Corinthians know he is talking about them too, without pointing the finger directly at them. All of us, he says, should ground our actions in love.

Discussion Questions

? How often in your daily life are you aware of doing something out of love for someone or something else?

? The religious practices Paul mentions are all from the ancient church. What kinds of things might we do out of love today?

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

The next section describes some characteristics of love. Paul names two positive aspects — patience and kindness — then lists what love is not. Several of these negative traits are things he accuses the Corinthians of elsewhere in this letter. The chart on the next page outlines Paul's not-so-subtle way of letting these folks know they have failed to treat each other with love.

Paul ends this section by telling us what *agape* does, again stressing that this kind of love isn't just a feeling but an action – it's described not just by adjectives but by verbs: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (13:7)

What love is not:	What the Corinthians are:
Envious (13:4)	“For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh...” (3:3)
Boastful (13:4)	“Your boasting is not a good thing.” (5:6; also see 1:29-31, 3:21, 4:7)
Puffed up, inflated, arrogant (13:4)	“But some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become arrogant...” (4:18; also see 4:6, 4:19, 8:1)
Rude, shameful (13:5)	“If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his fiancée...” (7:36; also see 5:1-2, 6:12-20, 11:2-16, 11:20-22)
Self-seeking (13:5)	“Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.” (10:24)
Joyful about wrongdoing (13:6)	“You yourselves wrong and defraud...” (6:8)

Discussion Questions

? Paul’s image of *agape* gives us a vision of a life filled with love. How much does that vision inspire you in your own life? How do you live out *agape* in the way you love God? In how you love your friends and family?

? In what ways does the church embrace and live out this vision of love? How do you see this vision of God’s reign of love in your church’s preaching? How is it present in your understanding of the sacrament of communion?

? Look at the list you made earlier of qualities or descriptions of love. How does your list compare with Paul’s description? Add anything that Paul mentioned that was not already on your list.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

The final section of Paul’s argument discusses the enduring quality of *agape*. As we saw earlier in this study, Paul and the early Christians believed that the end of time was right around the corner. Much of Paul’s letter is encouragement

for the Corinthians to remain faithful as they await Christ’s second coming. When that happens, God’s love will be fulfilled and other gifts will no longer be necessary. We won’t need prophecy, tongues, or teaching because God will reveal everything to us. Faith and hope sustain us as we wait for the second coming, but love – *agape* – will continue in the new age (13:13). While Christians wait for this new age, these gifts would also help them remain strong in resisting the influence of the surrounding Roman culture.

Discussion Questions

? Think about the ways you understood the world when you were a child. How do you see things differently now? How do you think our understandings will be different after Christ’s return?

? How would you live differently if you thought the world would end any day?

? How much do faith, hope, and love sustain you during tough times?

Exercise Covenant

A covenant is a sacred commitment between two parties that includes both obligations and promises. God makes several such covenants with the people of Israel, and some of these are accompanied by a sign of some sort. Try to name the parties involved in each one and what they promised before you check the scriptural citation.

- Rainbow (Genesis 9:8-13)
- Circumcision (Genesis 17:2, 9-11)
- The written law (Exodus 19:5-6, 21:1)
- Cup of wine (Mark 14:23-25)

The covenants God makes with humanity should serve as models for how we express our love for each other. It's no accident that the marriage covenant is used to symbolize God's relationship with the people of Israel and Christ's relationship with the church. Relationships — sexual or otherwise — can be most fully experienced within a covenant. Covenant embodies the promise of love that allows us to be open to someone else.

What Does it Mean for Us?

Paul is not talking about romantic love in 1 Corinthians 13 — the context of this chapter is harmony within the church. But because this chapter is read so often at weddings, we associate it with romantic love, and therefore with sexuality. Paul points out that all of our behavior as Christians must be grounded in *agape*, and we can extend that to include our sexual behavior. It may be tempting to become sexually involved when we think we are in love, but Paul reminds us that we have to stop and ask ourselves what kind of love we're dealing with. Is this *eros*, with all its

giddy, queasy wonderful-ness? Is it the warm, fondness of *philia*? Or is it *agape* that calls us to commitment and covenant, first to God, then to each other? As Paul writes, only *agape* endures, so it is on *agape* that covenants should be based.

? How often do you think people have sex because of *agape*? How often is marriage grounded in this kind of love? What happens when it's not?

? How do you recognize *agape*? How do you (or might you) practice *agape* in your own life?

? When love is viewed in the context of community, how does it relate to issues of sexuality, sexism, and embodiment?

? After considering what Paul is addressing in this chapter, what would it mean to read it at a wedding? What are some other occasions in the life of the church at which it could be read?

Closing

Close the group session with prayer for this time of study together, including any issues of praise or concern that group members want to share. Then sing together the first verse of "They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love."

We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
And we pray that our unity
May one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians
By our love, by our love,
Yes they'll know we are Christians
By our love.

SESSION SEVEN: THE RESURRECTED BODY

Opening Prayer

God of Life, we know that you have the power to overcome even death itself. Help us to live each day in the confidence of our own resurrection. We pray in the name of your resurrected son, our own Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Jumpstart

Tales from the Afterlife

Read and discuss the following accounts from people who have had “near death” experiences.

- Dianne (electrocuted): “How elated I felt! Now, out of my body, I had no worries, no cares. Never had I felt like this when I was ‘alive.’ My entire spirit body was transparent, and I was inside a glowing white light that extended about three feet around me. At that moment, an awareness overtook me – I am not my physical body! This realization made me feel so free, so wonderful! My spirit was glowing with a white light that illuminated the entire room. . . . There were two things I knew for certain: first, that I was Dianne, and second, that my physical body was dead. I also knew that the duplicate of Dianne on the bed was another me, but I did not know what she represented. Now, I was beginning to feel as if I were in three places at once!”

- Ranelle (burned in a plane crash): “My hand was clear, like transparent gel, but there was light coursing through it like clear blood. But, the light didn’t run in irregular patterns as it would in veins; rather, the light shot through my hands like rays or beams.

My whole hand sparkled with light. I looked down and saw that my feet also sparkled with light. And I noticed again that they weren’t burned. My feet and hands were perfect and whole. They radiated this glistening, beaming light.”

- Pam (“died” during surgery): “I noticed that as I began to discern different figures in the light — and they were all covered with light, they were light, and had light permeating all around them — they began to form shapes I could recognize and understand. I could see that one of them was my grandmother. I don’t know if it was reality or projection, but I would know my grandmother, the sound of her, anytime, anywhere. Everyone I saw, looking back on it, fit perfectly into my understanding of what that person looked like at their best during their lives. I recognized a lot of people.”

❓ What do these stories have in common? How do they relate to your own beliefs about the afterlife?

❓ What do you think happens to the body after you die?

Paul and the Afterlife

There is no evidence that people at the time of the early Christian church were anxious about what would happen to them after death. For many, there were enough worries involved in just staying alive. Paul, however, was a Pharisee, and

Pharisees believed all people would be resurrected to face judgement during God's final destruction of evil. Dale Martin suggests that there was conflict over this issue in the Corinthian church. He writes that some of the upper class folks who held Platonic ideas about separation of body and spirit may have objected not to the idea of resurrection itself, but to the fact that Paul preached about bodily resurrection. They despised the body and found the idea of it being resuscitated repulsive. * Paul goes to great lengths in this chapter to explain that he is not talking about the resuscitation of our earthly bodies but a transformation into a new, spiritual body.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-34

Paul writes that Christians must believe in the general resurrection of the dead in order to belief in Christ's resurrection (v. 13). And if they do not believe in the resurrection of Christ, they cannot believe in the gospel itself. Paul sees Christ's resurrection as the beginning of the general resurrection – the “first fruits” (v. 20): Because Christ has been resurrected, we soon will be too. Christ's resurrection is followed by the resurrection of all Christians, then God will destroy all enemies and finally death itself (vv. 23-26). This vision of the end times reflects Paul's apocalyptic Jewish background.

Paul writes that if people do not believe this is what will happen, then their faith is in vain, and there is no reason to put themselves in danger of persecution (v. 30). Paul mentions the practice of being baptized on behalf of someone who has died (v. 29), a custom that is not referred to anywhere else in

early Christian writings. Paul doesn't condemn the practice itself, but merely says it is meaningless if there is no resurrection.

It's Greek to Me

sarx (sarx) = flesh

psyche (SY-kee)= soul, breath

pneuma (NOO-ma) = spirit

For Paul, the human body (*soma*) has three different aspects: *sarx*, *psyche*, and *pneuma* – flesh, soul, and spirit. The resurrected body sheds the first two elements and becomes only *pneuma* – spirit. The resurrected body is thus described as a “spiritual” body.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:35-49

Having affirmed the importance of the resurrection, Paul turns to character of the resurrected body. He argues against two different misperceptions: first that the body is discarded, and second that the body remains the same and is merely resuscitated. It was the latter issue that made it hard for many to accept the idea of resurrection. They found it ghoulish to think our dead bodies would come back to life.

Paul ingeniously uses the metaphor of a seed to describe both the continuity and the transformation of the body through resurrection. This also helps to emphasize that the body really does die – the seed must “die” in the ground before the plant can live and grow (v. 36). In the resurrection, the body is stripped of the stuff of earth: flesh (*sarx*) and soul (*psyche*), so that the resurrected body consists only of spirit (*pneuma*). The image of the seed also helps illustrate that there are different kinds of bodies, both earthly and heavenly, each with its own kind of seed (v. 38-41).

* Dale Martin: *The Corinthian Body*, pp. 104-108.

Exercise

Now and Then

Look together at verses 42-49, where Paul compares our current body with the resurrected body, using Adam and Christ (the “last Adam”) as models. On a board or tablet, make two columns labeled “Now” and “Then.” Under “Now,” list all the words or descriptions of the current body, the one that is sown and that is connected with Adam. Under “Then,” list all the descriptions of the resurrected body, the one that is raised and is associated with Christ. If you are using different translations, notice what words each uses for the two kinds of bodies.

Paul is often misunderstood as saying that the body and soul are separate entities, and that after the physical body dies, the soul lives on. But he is actually describing two kinds of bodies: earthly and spiritual.

Discussion Questions

- ? How well does the seed analogy help you understand the relationship between the current body and the resurrected body?
- ? What other images might convey the sense of transformation with continuity?

Background Check: In some of the Gospel accounts, Jesus’ disciples don’t recognize the risen Christ when they first see him. Look at the following passages to see how they do or do not support Paul’s argument that the body is transformed when it is resurrected:

- Matthew 28:16-17
- Luke 24:13-16
- Luke 24:36-39
- John 29:14-16
- John 21:4

Read 1 Corinthians 15:50-58

Now for the tricky part: How does this transformation happen? Even Paul can’t adequately explain this: it’s a mystery (v. 51). But it will happen in an instant – “in the twinkling of an eye” – accompanied by the last trumpet. God’s victory through Christ will be complete. In verse 58 Paul concludes the argument he started at the beginning of this chapter. Because God will have the final victory, our faith in Christ and the resurrection is not in vain.

Discussion Questions

- ? Do you think Paul cops out by not explaining how this transformation will happen? Why or why not?
- ? What image do you have of the last judgment?
- ? After reading Paul’s argument, how convinced are you that belief in a general resurrection is crucial to Christian faith?

What Does it Mean for Us?

In this long but fascinating description of the resurrected body, Paul tries to refute the Corinthians’ notions of either dead bodies being resuscitated or of disembodied souls floating around in heaven. While the Corinthians may have held what we would call “superstitions” about what happens after death, Christians today may resist Paul’s argument because of a more cynical, scientific mindset. His description requires us to use our imagination because the resurrection is unlike anything else we know. Like the Corinthians, we have to rely on faith, since resurrection cannot be proven scientifically. Consider that as you discuss the following questions together.

? How does Paul's description of the resurrected body compare with the near-death accounts we read in the Jumpstart exercise?

? How does Paul's description of the resurrected body influence your beliefs?

? How does belief or non-belief in bodily resurrection affect how you care for your body while you're alive?

? How has this study of 1 Corinthians affected your view of your body? Of the church?

Closing

Close this final group session with prayer thanking God for this time of study together and the hope that you will continue to value God's gifts of embodiment and sexuality and use them in responsible and loving ways. Then sing together the first verse of "They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love."

We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
We are one in the spirit,
We are one in the Lord,
And we pray that our unity
May one day be restored.
And they'll know we are Christians
By our love, by our love,
Yes they'll know we are Christians
By our love.

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