

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.