

Corinthians – Summary from Session One

Introduction, First Corinthians, Chapter 1:1 – 9 – Salutation and Thanksgiving

First and Second Corinthians are among the most frequently quoted books of the Bible. The love verses come from these books, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy; it does not boast...” “... faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love...” The primary liturgy used during the eucharist (communion, or Lord’s Supper) is found in *1 Corinthians* (as well as the synoptic gospels), “...That the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me’ ... “

These letters were not, however, just a compilation of wisdom sayings or theological constructs. They may appear to be so when we look at a few verses at a time the way we might during the Sunday morning scripture reading. They were rather an attempt by the founder of a community of an early Christ movement to resolve conflicts within the community that he had founded. Paul was not just preaching the gospel. He was trying to fix a dysfunctional church – a church that had become divided, that misunderstood spirituality, and that without a common religious heritage, appeared to be losing its moorings.

The Corinthians study we undertake in these sessions is the story of an early Christian evangelist as he attempts to work his way through a maze of misunderstandings, conflicts, diminished authority, roadblocks, declining participation, and perhaps a few ambushes. In short, the church at Corinth, in some ways, looked very much like the church of the twenty-first century. Paul was breaking new ground in his struggle to hold together and make relevant the assembly he had founded in a world far removed from that of his past training and religious background. We might find parallels in our struggles today.

In the first session we began with a brief background sketch on the two letters to the Corinthians found in the *New Testament*. Paul was a Jew from Tarsus in Asia Minor, who was trained as a Pharisee and was known for persecuting followers of The Way (the Christ movement) in the mid-30’s c.e. On the road from Jerusalem to Damascus the resurrected Jesus appeared to him in a great light. Paul was struck blind. After three days his sight was restored, and he began to preach the gospel of the crucified Christ. He initially traveled primarily in Asia Minor (Galicia, Iconium, Antioch, Lycia) establishing assemblies (churches) mostly composed of gentiles (non-Jews). Later he moved on east to Troas and then to Greece (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens), sometimes successful and sometimes not.

In the spring of 50 c.e., about 20 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the Apostle Paul traveled down the road 50 miles south from Athens to the port and

major trading city of Corinth. It is likely (contradicting the storyline in *Acts*) that Timothy and Silas accompanied Paul on this journey to Corinth.

Paul was hosted in Corinth by fellow Jewish tent-makers Prisca and Aquila, believers in Christ who had previously been expelled from Rome. Prisca and Aquilla would have made their home in the loft above their workshop, while Paul slept below among the tools and rolls of leather and canvas. Paul spent about 18 months in Corinth evangelizing, teaching and starting up house assemblies. He would have worked as a tent-maker alongside Aquilla to earn his keep. In a thriving cosmopolitan city like Corinth there would have been plenty of work for those skilled in working with leather and canvas.

In Paul's letters, he claimed the household of Stephanas to be the first converts to the Christ movement in Achaia (the province in which Corinth is located). This suggests that Prisca and Aquilla, though they had been in Corinth for some time before Paul arrived, had either been unsuccessful as missionaries, or perhaps had not tried. Ultimately, they became the most committed members of his missionary team. They later helped prepare the way for Paul in both Ephesus and Rome. Paul's strategy in Corinth was clearly to start by recruiting those who were able to help by providing facilities (for assemblies) and funds to expand his ministry. At the same time, he was able to personally remain financially independent of his early converts by working at his trade. He probably left Corinth just before the end of the sailing season in the fall of 51, having been expelled from the province of Achaia by the Roman governor, Gallio.

In his absence, the assemblies struggled, arguing among themselves, and apparently confused by rival missionaries who had followed Paul into the city with a similar, yet somewhat different, message about the crucified Christ. Now based in Ephesus, Paul was unable to return himself, but sent messengers and a series of at least five letters to the assemblies at Corinth in attempt to unravel their confusion and get them back on track. While not all of his letters are available to us today, the ones we do have access to can be found in the New Testament as *First and Second Corinthians*.

Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians* began with a typical Greco-Roman three-part salutation followed by a thanksgiving. In the salutation, (1) the author identifies himself, (2) names the addressees, and (3) offers greetings. In his salutation (1 Corinthians 1:1–3) Paul identified himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God”, immediately establishing his authority. He makes it clear that he hasn't been preaching and founding assemblies on his own but was chosen by God to do so.

The addressees are God's people in the assembly in Corinth. The Greek word for assembly is *Ekklesia*, which is the standard term for the assembly of citizens of the Greek city-state. The assembly Paul founded was to be an alternative to the established political assembly in the city of Corinth. Many modern Bible versions translate *Ekklesia* as “church” to conform to our twenty-first century concept of the

Christian church. Paul did not set out to start a new religion, and while the assemblies Paul founded were not intended to be churches in our modern sense, they were groups of individuals united in their belief in the crucified Christ.

There were actually multiple house assemblies that Paul had established in Corinth. By referring to “God’s assembly” in his letter, Paul was attempting to expand the perspective of the Corinthians to the broader movement. Sometimes Paul referred to the “whole assembly” meaning all of the existing assemblies of the Christ movement.

In the third part of the salutation, Paul changed the traditional Greco-Roman greeting from “rejoice” to “grace” and added the traditional Jewish greeting of “peace” (shalom).

In the Thanksgiving, (1 Corinthians 1:4–9) Paul focused on “speech”, “knowledge” and “spiritual gifts”, three areas that he would discuss in greater detail in his early arguments in the letter proper. Paul assured the Corinthians in the thanksgiving that they are protected – will be held blameless – in the end days that are to come. He is thankful that God is faithful, and the assembly should not have to worry about their fate in the imminent completion of the final events of history (return of Christ) that Paul expects.

In the main body of the letter, Paul begins to deal with several divisions he sees among the Corinthians. There seems to be a competition, with different factions each identifying with a favorite “guru”. There is an attachment for many of the members of the assembly to wisdom (*Sophia*) instead of Paul’s gospel of the crucified Christ. Some members seem to be overly excited about their perceived exalted spiritual status (related to wisdom) when compared to others in the assembly who have a lower social status.

Paul also seems to be concerned about his own authority compared with that of a rival missionary, Apollos, who had been evangelizing in Corinth in Paul’s absence. The cultural environment of the Corinthians would not have allowed most of them to easily understand or adopt Paul’s historical view of reality. Paul framed his basic gospel of Christ’s crucifixion-resurrection as God’s fulfillment of the promises to Israel through Abraham. For the non-Jewish believers among Paul’s converts, God’s promises to Abraham didn’t resonate. Apparently, Apollos, on the other hand, had presented them with an alternative gospel more oriented to the Greek reality dominant in Corinth and the Hellenistic culture. They could more easily grasp the concept of Jesus as a Wisdom teacher

In the early part of the main section of the letter, Paul began with a five-step argument on divisiveness and unity: 1) Formal appeal to overcome the Corinthians’ divisiveness; 2) Counter the “wisdom” (*sophia*) that he sees lying behind the divisiveness with the foolishness of the gospel that features the crucified Christ; 3) Use of sarcasm to attack the exalted spiritual status tied to Apollos; 4) Paul’s view of the relationship between his ministry and the ministry of Apollos in Corinth; 5) His defense against criticism and the assertion of his fatherly role in the foundation of the community.

Throughout his arguments, Paul used the standard forms of Greek-Roman oratory familiar to his Corinthian audience. We will present these arguments in Session Two.

Primary Texts: *1 Corinthians (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries)*, by Richard A. Horsley, Abingdon Press, 1998; *2 Corinthians (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries)*, by Calvin J. Roetzel, Abingdon Press, 2007

Secondary Text: *Paul: A Critical Life*, by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor OP, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996

Next Week: *Chapter 1: 10-6;20*